The Trouble At Pinelands

ERNEST M. POATE

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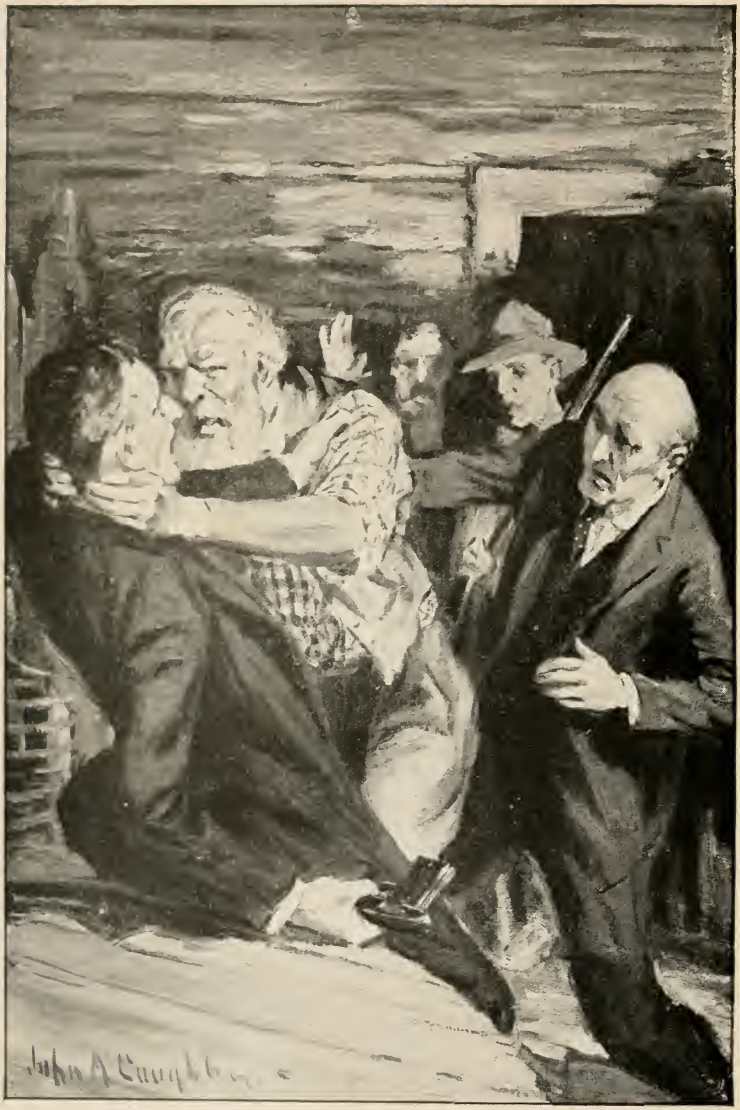

"I'll tote yuh to death along of me, anyhow."

(Frontispiece, Page 256.)

The Trouble at Pinelands

A Detective Story

BY

ERNEST M. POATE

CHELSEA HOUSE
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The Trouble at Pinelands

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The Trouble at Pinelands

CHAPTER I

THE POLTERGEIST

I COULD not sleep. I am an old man now and of settled habit; a "confirmed bachelor," the young folks call me. Even the smallest change of routine irks me; and so, on this night, I found it very hard to be comfortable in a strange bed.

Peter McGregor had gone north. He was in Baltimore to order flowers, consult the caterer, and make the final arrangements for the wedding breakfast. Only women were left in the old stone mansion; the McGregors called it "Fort House," because it had something of the grim, forbidding look of an old fort. Dorothy, Peter's sister, her invalid aunt, and the nurse, Miss Christie, were all here.

Miss Christie was too indifferent to care, I think; she was a very dormouse for contentment, and she slept so determinedly that I used to wonder when she found time to care for her patient. But Dorothy was timid, as most young girls are; and her Aunt Mary, who was paralyzed, was highly nervous at the best and declared that she'd never close an eye without a man in the house. And, indeed, I could not blame them much, for Fort House was a gloomy, eerie place, with its big, silent rooms and long, dark halls, wainscoted in time-stained oak and full of unexpected nooks and

1930

corners. Also, though well within the village, it stood far back from the street in a little grove of high, solemn pines; leafy shrubs grew thick about its gray walls, and honeysuckle vines climbed over its narrow windows and shaded them still further.

A man must be had to protect these lone women, and there was I—not a very efficient protector, I fear, since I am turned sixty-five and sadly crippled with rheumatism, but the best available. For my nephew, Lewis, Doctor C. Lewis Parker, Johns Hopkins Medical College, class of '17, though willing enough, was scarcely the man to come, since he was to marry Dorothy in two days; whereas I was of discreet age and with none to miss me at home. In spite of his assurances I knew well enough that I was a nuisance and no help in my nephew's house; he kept me with him simply because I was his only surviving kinsman, as he was mine, and because his kind heart would not leave me to end my days in some home for the aged. Yes, I knew that I was but a burden upon his goodness—knew it sadly, but without bitterness; a long old age tempers one's pride.

But here I was, the guardian of my nephew's bride to be; and I tossed upon my bed and could not sleep for long, sad thoughts. I rejoiced in the boy's happiness; truly I rejoiced, for Dorothy McGregor was the sweetest of girls and as tender to a useless old man as if I had been her own kin. Yes, it was best, oh, surely it was best, that these two kindly, handsome young folk should marry and make their

own home. I looked back through a vista of long, lonely years at my own friendless life, a life that might have been so different if my Dorothy had lived.

They would marry and be happy in each other. But—I am a very selfish old man, I fear—but what of me? I had no other home; and, were she never so tender of heart, what bride desires that her honeymoon should have such a worthless, worn-out satellite as I? No, these two must build their own nest; and it would have no place for me. Then I thought briefly of Aunt Mary McGregor, paralyzed from the waist down, these fourteen years, and bearing her troubles with such saintly patience; where would she go, and how would she live after the wedding? We two might marry also, I thought, and laughed mirthlessly at the idea. Old maid and old bachelor, we might join our troubles and spend the evening of our days together, enlivening each other with comparisons of our various aches and pains. For I must admit that Aunt Mary, for all her sweet patience, was overfond of discussing her symptoms.

The old house was very quiet, except for those strange creakings and rustlings which one hears at night in these old places. Faint, eerie noises, these, which made the silence more profound; I fancied that Fort House whispered to itself of days gone by.

Without was the clear, cool hush of a North Carolina summer's night. It had been a hot June day, but the night was cool, as are all our nights, and a round, bright moon hung high, flooding the

lawn with pale light, making the black shadows of the pines blacker yet, silvering the leaves of the honeysuckle vine at my windows. The sweet, heavy scent of a few late blossoms drifted in to me, bearing with it that faint, sinister suggestion of mystery and crime that belongs peculiarly to the cloying odor of honeysuckles in a hushed, dark night.

That odor fretted me, awaking in my mind unpleasant fancies. This was a dismal place, the old Fort House; no proper setting for such a vivid young flower as Dorothy McGregor. I strove to fancy the house filled with flowers, crowded with gay-dressed, laughing wedding guests, and I could not, even now, with a wedding two days off. I was queerly thankful that Dorothy and Lewis would not live here, but in a little white bungalow, red-roofed, banked about with flowers, open to the kindly, honest sun. For how could young lovers be happy here, in this grim stone pile among the solemn pines, this mournful old house, which creaked and whispered to itself so mysteriously of nights, whose dark, airless rooms were heavy with the scent of honeysuckle? Somewhere I seemed to have read or heard that the honeysuckle grows best and gives its strongest odor about places of secret crime. The fancy obsessed me; I wondered what might be the history of this old mansion—for I was but newly come to Pinelands, a year ago—what dark deeds these walls had known in days long gone; what dreadful histories were bared in the self-communings of those ancient, creaking timbers.

It was very late, and I was tired out. Moreover

I was sad because I must so soon give up my nephew to his new wife. My aged bones ached, and my knee joints creaked and groaned, as I paced the floor. I was feverish, perhaps, and so fanciful; or it may be that I was fey. Whatever the explanation, a sudden conviction swept over me, as of actual knowledge.

Fort House was haunted. I knew it. Without knowing how or why, that knowledge swept over me in a chill wave of fear that raced up my spine and plucked at the short hairs of my neck. It left me shaken and dismayed, with a lump of ice where my heart had been.

The place was deadly still. Even the indistinct complaints of aged timbers were hushed, and there seemed no possibility of sound in all the world. Then, from the hall below, came a whirring click, whereat I gasped; the grandfather clock on the stair landing struck twelve—deliberately, solemnly. The mellow chime of its old gong dropped dead on the still air, without an echo. The silence of the tomb, a hush intolerably profound. Then, with dreadful suddenness, a clanking as of chains, the crash of broken crockery, a shrill, horrid screech!

My veins seemed to freeze, and I could not breathe. As in nightmares, an inescapable weight dragged at every limb, held me helpless.

What was abroad I knew not, save that it could be no honest thing. Why, I would have prayed for a palpable burglar; I could have fallen on his neck with joyful tears, though he were the worst villain unhung!

Then I heard a faint stir in the room beyond mine, where Dorothy McGregor slept; the tiniest of frightened sobs. That sound heartened me. I am no hero; but in a long life I have observed more than once that terrors which will turn a solitary man craven may be faced almost with boldness if he has but a weaker one beside him to protect. Alone, I dared not stay in my room, much less venture forth; but there was Dorothy next me, and downstairs her helpless aunt and the nurse. They would look to me for aid, for courage; and knowing that, I made shift to conquer my fears a very little.

I threw a bath robe over my shoulders and padded out into the black hall, barefoot.

"Dorothy!" I whispered; somehow, I dared not call aloud. "My dear, are you all right?"

Her answer came muffled through the door. "Yes, Uncle George. It's nothing." But her shaking voice belied the words. "It's nothing to be af-f-fraid of. We've heard it before. Wait, I'm coming out. Aunty'll be scared."

In a moment her door opened, and Dorothy appeared, faintly visible by the pale moon that shone in her window. She was wrapped in some sort of filmy, lacy robe, and her fine black hair, which lay across one shoulder, in a braid thicker than my wrist, fell down the front of her negligee, right to her knees.

She groped for my arm and clutched it tight. Neither of us thought of making a light. Perhaps we both feared what that light might reveal.

"Let's go down to Aunt Mary's room," she

whispered. "She'll be scared to death, poor thing! I'm scared, my own self, and just think of her, not able even to move!"

A plump, delicious little thing, she huddled close against me. I felt her tender body tremble and put an arm across one shoulder.

"Come along, child," said I. "But give me a hand on the stairs here, because my rheumatism is pretty bad to-night. What was it?"

Dorothy cuddled my arm. "Poor dear!" she whispered. "Careful of that step; we're just at the turn. Why, it was the Poltergeist."

"Huh?" I stopped short, repeating the outlandish word. "Poltergeist? What's that?"

"Why, that scream and everything. It comes every few nights lately, only I never said anything about it outside, because it upsets Aunt Mary so. She won't have me even mention it to Lewis, let alone any other body; just says such things oughtn't to be talked about. After I showed her the broken dishes she—— Oh-h-h!"

She broke off, gripping my arm tighter still, pressing close against me, to the detriment of my sorer shoulder; then she made a quaint little sound, a sort of whispered scream.

I stared violently, too; for there was a ghostly rustling in the lower hall, just by our knees, and something dim and white and shapeless seemed to whip past us and disappear. I say seemed; for it was too dark to be sure, and I stretched out my hand toward it and felt nothing. It might have

been pure fancy, a breath of air through the hall, a mouse scurrying along the wall.

"There, Dotty!" I whispered. "It wasn't anything—and, besides, it's gone. See?"

"I know," she agreed doubtfully. "I know it wasn't anything, and Peter always says so, too. He watched two nights to make sure; only he went to sleep both times. But it scares me just the same."

By now we had groped our way to Aunt Mary's room. She slept on the ground floor, being, as I may have said, paralyzed from the waist down. Her nurse, Miss Christie, slept in a little chamber which opened off of her patient's room.

We listened, our heads close together, pressed against the closed door; presently we heard the sound of heavy breathing—a ladylike snore.

"That's Miss Christie," whispered Dorothy. "It didn't wake her up. Uncle George, she is the sleepingest thing! She makes me mad sometimes, she's so placid."

I heard the creak of springs, as some one moved in bed, and a weak, sad, patient voice called:

"Is any one there?"

"It's me, aunty," replied Dorothy. "We came to see if you were all right. Did you hear it?"

In the room beyond us the bed creaked again, as if some one struggled to sit up in it. Then Aunt Mary's voice:

"Miss Christie!"

No answer.

A sigh. Then louder, but still patiently, sweetly: "Miss Christie! Nurse!"

"Aw-ugh!" A yawn, a sleepy murmur, and then, when Aunt Mary had called once more: "Yes, Miss McGregor, I'm comin'! Ho-hum!"

Bare feet plumped to the floor and padded out toward us; I could fancy the nurse digging her fists into sleep-blurred eyes.

"Wha's a matter?"

"Snap on the lights, please; now help me to sit up. Hand me that shawl. Open the door, please; Dorothy's out there."

A line of light showed at our feet, along the threshold. We heard a bustle within, and presently the door opened. I hesitated a moment, half blinded by the sudden light. Yet I saw the retreating figure of the nurse, dumpy and shapeless in a bath robe, her head an aureole of tousled blond hair. She vanished into her own alcove room, and I heard her drop upon the bed, with one more yawn, followed, without appreciable pause, by gentle snores.

Dorothy turned to me. The blue of her negligee matched her sea-blue eyes, and her soft black hair was a cloud about her dimpled face, still delicately flushed with sleep. Light and company had quite restored her courage; she laughed at me merrily.

"Come along in, Uncle George! You look lovely. No? Well, just a minute, then."

She turned to her aunt. The old lady was propped high with pillows, a beautiful old Paisley shawl wrapped about her thin shoulders. Her snow-white hair was dressed exactly as for a ball. She was a wonderful old lady, always precise and well groomed, in spite of her invalidism. Her black eyes

were bright, but her thin, patrician face bore a look of patient sadness. She stretched out a slender hand.

"There, child! What is it?"

"Why—why, aunty, you know! Didn't you hear it?"

Aunt Mary sighed. "Yes, Dorothy, dear, but these are things best not spoken about."

"Did it wake you up?"

"No, child. I haven't been asleep. Shift that pillow, please; the pain is worse to-night." She sighed again, with sad, upturned eyes. "It seems as if I had enough to bear, without that. But it's all for the best, no doubt. I must be patient!" She had the sweet, resigned expression of some aged saint. "I was just getting quieted down, too. There, child, run back to bed. So sorry you were disturbed, Mr. Uhlman," she told me over her niece's shoulder. "This child is fanciful—nervous."

"Did I disturb you, too, Aunt Mary?" Dorothy's voice was remorseful. "But I thought you'd be frightened, dear."

Aunt Mary made a little deprecatory gesture. "Why? I'm not afraid of spirits, my child; I'll be with them soon enough. Go now, but call Miss Christie first. I want her to change my pillows."

She closed her eyes, sighed wearily, then spoke again to me, where I stood in the dark hall.

"You mustn't mind what you heard, Mr. Uhlman. It's nothing—merely a materialization. Trivial spirits can't harm us."

We were dismissed. As Dorothy closed the door

very gently, I heard Aunt Mary say: "Raise me a little more, Miss Christie. And another pillow, please. My head's very bad again. This has upset me." She sighed plaintively. Both tone and words were of an angelic resignation; I could not understand Dorothy's manner.

For, now that we were alone in the dark hall, she gritted her little, even teeth together. "Darn!" I heard her mutter.

"What is it, child?"

"Oh, nothing! Aunt Mary's on another rampage. Wish I'd left her alone, but you never know how to take her."

"My dear!" I reproved. "You oughtn't to speak of your aunt so. She has a hard time, poor lady!"

Dorothy laughed shortly. "So do I! Oh, I know you think I'm horrid, but you just stick around and see for yourself."

I sighed. The young are intolerant of invalidism. "But about the other thing, Dorothy—the scream we heard, and all that? What did you mean by 'Poltergeist?' "

The girl shook her head. "Come away, Uncle George. She'll hear us. Never mind that now. Oh"—as I persisted—"that's what Aunt Mary calls 'manifestations,' screams at night, broken dishes, things missing from the pantry, and all that. She wrote to some learned society about it, and they said it was a Poltergeist, a little, malicious ghost that plays tricks like that. They wanted to send somebody here to investigate. Come, we've got to get out of here; Aunt Mary has ears like a lynx. In the

morning she'll tell how our talking kept her awake all night long. Come on, Uncle George, do! Never mind the ghost. I hear enough about that; Aunt Mary talks of it to me for hours on end, when she's in the right humor. She's a great spiritualist, you know."

In silence she bustled me back to my room. One would have thought that she was actually afraid of that sweet, patient old saint, her Aunt Mary.

CHAPTER II

BOBWHITE

I WENT back to bed, but not to sleep. The moon had set, and the pitch dark of the old house intensified all my foolish fancies. Over and over I went through the round of morbid thought: my nephew's marriage, the bleak, friendless future that awaited me; this dismal old barracks, pervaded by the sinister odor of honeysuckle; the faint, mysterious creakings and stirrings of its ancient walls. I caught myself listening, breathless, for a repetition of that awful screech; I vowed that nothing should induce me to spend another night in the haunted place. I paid Dorothy and her aunt the meed of a tremendous admiration because they accepted this Poltergeist so calmly.

Sleep stood far off from me, while the night dragged inexorably on, and the deep-toned grandfather clock on the landing tolled out hour after hour. At last I felt the first subtle changes of coming dawn.

From somewhere a fugitive breeze, the merest vagrant breath of air, stirred in the solemn pines, so that they whispered. The leaves of the honeysuckle vines at my window moved, and the heavy scent of their flowers poured in more strongly. The air seemed cleaner, cooler. One could not say that it was lighter, but the darkness grew more bearable. And then, little by little, the east faded, turned gray,

lavender, pink; then it began to flush with the first, faint, exquisite tints that precede sunrise.

I sighed deep and turned over. My weary, strained limbs relaxed. Now that the night was gone, and daylight began to be a promise almost fulfilled, ghosts troubled me no longer, nor did sad thoughts have power to haunt me. "Joy cometh in the morning," the psalmist said. To me came peace at least, and I settled to rest.

My lids were heavy with that delicious languor which welcomes sleep after a long, troubled night; an insistent whistling, right under my window, roused me.

I sat up, muttering angrily. Some milkman, no doubt, or some furnace boy, wooing the cook. There it was again; a fine hour for love-making! Would she never wake up? Confound all cooks and their swains!

Then my delightful drowse fled away, leaving me wide awake, my last hope of slumber gone. I knew that this was no amorous milkman, whose racket might be hushed by well-directed abuse.

"Bob*white!* Bob*white!*"

I held an aching head between my hands. That insistent two-toned whistle, repeated again and again, in maddening iteration, came from no man, but a bird—the "bobwhite," the quail of North Carolina, which some misguided idiots would have protected as a songbird!

But now it was full light, and, I suppose, something after five o'clock. With a dispirited sigh I arose and began to dress slowly. I had made more

of a sacrifice than I realized when I offered, in my innocence, to spend the night at Fort House.

I shaved and dressed leisurely, to the accompaniment of bobwhite's continual clamor; at last I descended the wide stairs silently, lest I wake others. I heard no stir from Dorothy's room; she, no doubt, was well used to the song of quail. As I may have said, Fort House stood apart and alone in its grove of pines, and wild quail might well nest in the tangle of scrub oaks behind it. They sang under her window every morning, I suppose, so that Dorothy heard them no longer. But I rejoiced privately that the house I shared with my nephew, Lewis Parker, stood close to its neighbors and far off from wild birds and, I hoped, wilder ghosts.

But, as I reached the ground floor and tiptoed past Aunt Mary's door, I had proof that bobwhite had disturbed others beside myself. For all her long stay in this house, Miss McGregor was not yet used to the outcry of quail, it appeared.

"Miss Christie!" I heard. "Miss Christie! Dear me, has she gone to sleep again? Miss Christie!"

A sleepy murmur from the inner room.

"Miss Christie! Get dressed, please, and go out. See if you can't drive that wretched bird away; I can't stand it any longer!"

I smiled to myself, for the sweet, resigned voice had turned sharp, almost irritable. Plainly there were limits even to Aunt Mary's patience. And from without the whistle of that miserable quail continued monotonously: "Bob*white!*" Three seconds, then: "Bob*white!*"

Then I went on into the living room, selected a book and settled myself to wait for breakfast. It might have been an hour before I heard voices at the rear of the house; they came closer, sounded from the dining room, just behind me. I listend frankly, welcoming any signs of human companionship after my long vigil; for nothing is so lonely as a deserted sitting room in the early morning, when all but yourself are still in their rooms.

"Yassum, Miss Dor'thy, thassall, ma'am. Them two gold-banded chiny cups done gone bust, an' th' sweet potato pie all et up."

"Oh, dear!" That was Dorothy's voice. "I don't mind the pie so much, but I do wish the ghost wouldn't break my best dishes, Rosina."

The Poltergeist retained an appetite for material dainties, it seemed! For some reason that touch rendered it less formidable to my fancy; besides, it was now bright sunlight, and who fears ghosts in the daytime? I felt very courageous.

But the cook was speaking again, in a rich, throaty drawl. "Yassum, Miss Dor'thy. Them ghosteses ain't got no apershashun, is they? But, ma'am, I done got my satisfy of ghosteses, Miss Dor'thy. I'se standed 'em too long. Cain't leave you-all ontwel th' weddin', a-course; but when you-all gits safe married, Fort House is th' place I'se a-gwine t' be anywheres else in No'th Ca'lina but! Yassum, Miss Dor'thy! You heahs me!"

Dorothy sighed. "We'll all be leaving then, I hope, Rosina. It is a spooky old place, I know, but Aunt Mary likes it here."

Rosina departed kitchenward, muttering something unintelligible which I fancied was less than complimentary to Miss McGregor; and Dorothy pushed aside the portière and saw me.

"Why, good morning, Uncle George! You're up early."

I rose rather stiffly, for this night had done my rheumatism no good, and bowed.

"Good morning, Dorothy! Did you sleep well?"

"Not very." However she looked fresh as a rose, and her blue eyes shone. Her thick black hair was coiled simply about a shapely head; she wore some sort of filmy silk robe of a pale blue color, and ravishingly pretty she looked in it, too.

"The Poltergeist upset my night," she went on. "I got up early to see what damage he'd done this time. You'll excuse me for coming out so informally?" She looked down at her negligee with a bright blush. "I'm going to skip right back upstairs and dress now—honest I am."

"You look very sweet, my dear." I am old enough to say such things quite impersonally. "But tell me first about the ghost."

She blushed again. "Why—why, Uncle George, it seems so silly!"

"Silly!" I repeated. "There was nothing silly about that scream in the night; it brought the goose flesh out all over me."

"Well," she admitted. "But you see I've heard it so often, and it's never done any harm."

"Often? You never mentioned it before."

Her color heightened further at my tone of reproach. She came closer and perched on the arm of my chair, smoothing my old bald head gently.

"No, I never spoke of it. Even Lewis doesn't know—except he's heard Peter joking about it sometimes. Maybe I'll tell him after we're married; but I couldn't bear to have him laugh at me. It's bad enough to have your brother always making fun, without your—your fiancé, too. But the ghost—well, it's come a dozen times or more. The first time was—let me see! It was about a year ago. I know it was after mother died, and Aunt Mary came here to live, because I remember how indignant she was. Just pooh-poohed and said it was all my imagination. But afterward she heard it, too; and then she began to read and study about spirits, until now she's a confirmed spiritualist—uses the ouija board and everything. But she never wants the Poltergeist talked about outside the family.

"What does it do? Why, little, mean tricks. It gets into the cupboards and steals things and breaks dishes; and it bangs the furniture about, and sometimes it screams like it did last night. Peter sat up to watch several times, but he never saw anything, though one night it pulled the chair out from under him. Peter claims he just went to sleep and fell over, but I know better. It was the Poltergeist! Aunt Mary claims you never can see them—they're invisible. She says they never do any real harm, only these little tricks, like breaking dishes and all that. But it is kind of unsettling, Uncle George. I'll be glad when Lewis and I are married, and we

can leave this old house for good. Only think, Uncle George, three days more!"

Then she jumped up with a cry. "My goodness, Lewis is coming over to breakfast, and here it is seven o'clock and after, and me not even dressed! I must run. Bother the Poltergeist! Aunt Mary'll tell you all about it, if you can once get her started. She loves to talk about ghosts. I've often wondered how she refrained from telling Lewis. And say"—she darted back to my side and whispered—"say, Uncle George, be awful nice to her this morning; jolly her up a little, will you? She will be in a terrible temper, I'm afraid."

She dropped a swift kiss upon my bald spot and ran out.

I settled back to wait for breakfast, rather impatiently, I must admit, for the night had tired me, and I craved hot coffee. But in twenty minutes Dorothy was back, demure and immaculate in a little blue-and-white gingham.

"Come along," she urged. "Let's go in and get started. We won't wait for Lewis; he'll be along directly. I want everything fixed and ready before Aunt Mary comes out."

So she led the way into the dining room, and I followed gratefully. I sat down, and Dorothy began to hurry Rosina.

"Quick, Rosina," she directed. "Bring in the coffeepot and those muffins. And get a fresh pat of butter; this looks mussy. I hear aunty."

The fat, motherly black cook gave one apprehensive glance at the doorway, smoothed her crisp

apron and fled. I wondered briefly that her household should be in such patent fear of that sweet, heroic old lady, Miss Mary McGregor.

Then I, too, heard the creak of her wheel chair, and presently Aunt Mary appeared in the door, riding in the invalid's chair in which she spent all her waking hours. Miss Christie propelled it, looking fresh and wholesome enough, in her clean white uniform, but yawning still. She was a sleepy sort of girl, a very sleepy sort!

Aunt Mary greeted us with her sad, patient smile, a smile to bring tears to your eyes, it was so obviously a struggle against despair. My heart went out to her for her pathetic bravery, poor, frail old lady! Her high-bred face beneath the crown of snow-white hair was pale and worn; she sighed deeply.

"Good morning, all," she quavered, her eyes bright with unshed tears; then she bit her lip and smiled again determinedly.

"Good morning, aunty. Why, you're looking quite bright, aren't you? Wheel her right up here, Miss Christie; everything's all ready. Here, aunty, here's your orange juice, all iced. Drink it right down, there's a dear. Rosina! A nice, hot cup of coffee for Aunty Mary—quick! I got up early, Aunt Mary, on purpose to make muffins for you: don't they look nice and appetizing? I'll butter one and just pop it into your mouth, shall I? I'm sure you're hungry this morning; you look so rested. You must have had a very good night."

Breathlessly, with a sort of desperate gayety,

Dorothy talked against time. Her aunt listened impatiently, still wearing that pathetic smile; with parted lips she evidently waited only an opportunity to interrupt. And now she found it.

"A good night!" She sighed deeply, tragically. "My dear! As though my nights were ever restful. I'm used to wakeful nights, and you know I'm not one to complain of the afflictions the Lord has seen fit to visit upon me. I try to bear them patiently and to keep sweet. But last night was terrible! It was so sweet of you, my dear, to come to my door in the night. Dorothy is always so thoughtful of her poor old aunt, Mr. Uhlman. I hadn't heard a sound; I was just beginning to doze off, and I thought to myself, 'I do believe I'm going to rest an hour or two,' when Dorothy knocked at the door. It was very kindly; Dorothy is inclined to be timid about the manifestations, Mr. Uhlman—the Poltergeist, you know. She hasn't studied spiritism as deeply as I have, of course. She naturally thinks I am timid, too; and so, being the most unselfish of children, she comes to me at once. Bless her! I hope you had no trouble getting about, Mr. Uhlman; those stairs creak so, I'm always afraid some one may stumble. I heard you going back to your room. I'd been feeling so rested, but, after you two had gone, I had such a terrible palpitation, and my neck knotted very badly. You know, Mr. Uhlman, I have so much trouble with the back of my neck. I can't think what brought it on. I was resting so nicely before you two came in, but afterward I had such a hard time!"

She paused to heave a vast sigh and absorb an equally vast bite of buttered muffin. "But I mustn't complain. I'm only thankful that the Lord sends me strength to bear my troubles patiently. I did get settled a trifle about daybreak, and then the birds began. Those quail, you know, bobwhites! I suppose it's my condition and perfectly absurd, so, of course, I never complain about it; but those birds set my nerves on edge so I can feel it all down my spine and into my limbs. You've no idea. I bore it as long as I could, but finally I was simply compelled to call Miss Christie." She paused to cough. "I'm rather hoarse, I'm afraid. Miss Christie sleeps so soundly, the poor dear!" Here she gave her nurse an affectionate smile. "I'm a dreadful trouble to you, am I not? Eventually I managed to wake her, and she threw a stick out of the window to drive the birds away. By that time my back was paining me so I couldn't possibly rest."

Aunt Mary stopped, beamed upon us with that plaintive, angelic look and devoted herself to her muffins and coffee. Having succeeded so admirably in putting us all three in the wrong, apportioning justly to each his share in her discomforts of the night, all in the sweetest, most kindly fashion in the world, she appeared to feel rather better. We others looked at our plates. I, for one, felt my ears burn, and my appetite seemed to have left me. I began to realize that it is not always easy to live with the most sweetly patient of invalids. And yet Dorothy's attitude seemed rather callous. Poor Aunt Mary! She had a great deal to bear, after all! I reproached

myself for having added, however unwittingly, to her discomforts.

Upon the little hush came the sound of the door-bell, and Dorothy flew to answer it, her face brightening beautifully. Presently she returned, clinging to the arm of my nephew, Doctor C. Lewis Parker. Tall and spare he towered above her, and his black eyes looked down adoringly into her blue ones.

"Good morning, Aunt Mary!" He bowed over her frail hand with a stately courtesy that was not unbecoming. "Hello, Uncle George. Good morning, Miss Christie. Sorry to be late, honey. I had to make a call. Did you save me some coffee? Oh, good morning, Rosina! You didn't forget me, did you?"

The fat cook beamed at him, rolling admiring eyes. Servants are always fond of my nephew. "Nossuh, Mist' Lewis—doctah, Ah means. Ah done fetched yuh a special cup, made strong, suh."

The doctor sat down and unfolded his napkin. "Well, honey, what were you talking about?"

Dorothy smiled demurely, with a sly glance at me. "Why, about ghosts, Lewis—about our ancestral spook."

Lewis stared and stroked his little black mustache. His face was square, and his high cheek bones gave it a solemn look, almost Indian. "About ghosts? Nonsense! There's no such thing as a ghost!" If my nephew had a fault, it was that he was a shade too serious, a bit too literal-minded. He was not overendowed with humor.

His pronouncement provoked a frank laugh from

Dorothy. I think she thoroughly enjoyed his solemnity. But Miss McGregor bridled.

"Indeed! Young man——" Then she broke off quite suddenly and resumed her normal sweetness of temper. One might have fancied that she did not care to discuss spirits with Lewis. "My niece is jesting," she went on, with a pale, patient smile. "I'm afraid I wearied her. It is too easy to bore the young and healthy, when one is an old, worthless invalid. I'm sorry, my dear. I know I must be a great trial, but I'm thankful that I can drop into the background gracefully. I bear my trials as best I can. You all know I never complain. I realize that I can't expect much attention from happy, carefree young folks, and I don't look for it. I know an invalid is always a burden, so I try not to make things too hard for poor Dorothy; she's so self-sacrificing! Ah, if I were only able, how I would love to turn in and help get ready for the wedding! But all I can do is sit back and wish you well, children, and say nothing when my few wants are forgotten. I know I can't expect attention with a wedding only three days off, and I don't expect it. I just love the happy stir and bustle of preparation; I seem to grow young again, because I share Dorothy's pleasure so keenly. Perhaps it's that which has made me so restless of late. I've suffered much more than usual this week; no doubt it has been the excitement. But I wouldn't have it changed for worlds; I enjoy it so! What are a few more sleepless nights, a few more pains, to me? I have had so many—so many!" She sighed deeply, with

that sweet, suffering smile of one too ethereal for this rough world. "You must bear with me, children. A few days, and you'll be gone, happy in each other, leaving me to my solitude and suffering. Ah, it's better so! I shall be happy, knowing that I am no longer a damper on your joys."

Aunt Mary wiped away a tear and looked more seraphic than ever. Dorothy and Lewis, unreasonably enough, appeared rather downcast.

The girl looked whimsically at Lewis; I fancy she squeezed his hand under the table. Then she dropped her napkin and, under cover of retrieving it, whispered swiftly to me:

"Don't mind aunty—in bad temper!"

So she seemed to be. I was rather taken aback by the revelation. I wondered how often Miss McGregor was in this mood, and my sympathy for her niece increased momently. If the old lady had been humanly irritable it wouldn't have been so bad; but this pious, sweet-toned flood of indirect complaint was hard to bear. One felt hopelessly in the wrong; one felt that Aunt Mary was forbearing and magnanimous in spite of her pains; and one rebelled thereat.

"I'm sorry you're having a bad time," said Lewis apologetically. "Is there anything I could do, Aunt Mary?"

She sighed. "I think I could stand everything else if it weren't for the quail. Doctor Parker"—she never could be induced to call my nephew "Lewis" —"Doctor Parker, those birds drive me almost mad! You know, I sleep very poorly; about dawn I used

to be able to settle down for a little nap. But it's just then that the quail begin: 'Bob*white!* bob*white!*' —until I could just scream with the knots in my neck. I don't know what's going to become of me; I can't stand it much longer. You know I'm not one to complain; I try to bear my burdens patiently, but I've reached the end of my strength. Dorothy and Peter don't realize how I've been tried, because I never talk about it; Peter just laughs, when he could have taken his gun and driven them away. But, if those quail keep whistling under my window much longer, I shall go mad!"

She finished in a rush of words, as her face contorted queerly, and her eyes reddened and filled with tears.

"Oh, aunty!" cried Dorothy remorsefully.

My nephew rose and came round the table to pat the old lady's hand comfortingly. "Never mind, Aunt Mary; I'll see to it for you. Peter won't be back till to-morrow night, but I'm sure he wouldn't mind my borrowing his shotgun. I'll get up at daybreak in the morning and come over here and shoot those quail for you. There can't be more than three or four, I don't think; they've nested into the scrub oaks out back, most likely. I'll see to it, Aunt Mary, don't you fret any more!"

Miss McGregor seemed a little comforted. "I'm a troublesome old woman," she sighed, "but you don't realize what I suffer!" Then she rewarded Lewis with her sweet, patient smile, albeit a bit weak and watery.

CHAPTER III

A BAD SPELL

THE nurse wheeled Aunt Mary back to her room to rest, and we others rose. Our breakfast had been pretty effectually spoiled; none of us, except Aunt Mary, had managed to eat much. The old lady, however, had put away an excellent meal in spite of her sufferings.

"Poor old dear!" sighed Lewis. "Honey, I'm afraid we've been selfish in our happiness; we haven't thought enough of Aunt Mary. After all she's a great sufferer."

I started; that was so exactly Miss McGregor's opinion. Dorothy looked at her lover almost suspiciously, but he was perfectly serious. As I have said, my nephew was very serious-minded.

The girl sighed in relief and flashed an impudent glance at me. "Yes, poor aunty," she said. "She's a great sufferer, and she never complains."

"That's what makes it so pitiful," declared Lewis soberly. "But come out doors a minute, honey; let's look over things and see if we can't locate those quail."

Knowing very well that I wasn't wanted, I watched through the window, as the two young folks walked, hand in hand, down the path, which led through the pines at the east of the old house, into the thick scrub oak jungle behind it. Although in the heart of a sizable village, it was a solitary spot. The

grounds of Fort House took in an entire block; and in its center one might well have fancied himself in the heart of the wilderness.

Thinking themselves out of sight, no doubt, the two lovers stood very close. Dorothy's head rested against my nephew's shoulder; her face was upturned to his. I sighed and turned away. I am a lonely old man.

Then I heard Rosina's voice behind me. "Mist' Uhlman, is Mist' Lewis done gone? They's a telegrum comed, an' the boy done fotch it oveh, seein' they wa'n't nobody home to his place."

I took the yellow envelope. "All right, Rosina. He's out back with Miss Dorothy. There they come, now!" I stepped through the open French doors to meet them.

Lewis took the telegram, with that hint of flurry which touches every one at sight of the yellow envelope.

"What? Oh, yes! It's from old Floyd Somers. He was my classmate at medical school, you know; he's on the staff of some hospital for the insane up North. See what he says." He read the message over and scowled and smiled rather doubtfully, then scowled again. "'Sincere condolences. Glad to act as chief mourner. Arrive Monday.'"

Dorothy flushed and bit her lip. "I don't care, I think that's a great way to promise he'll be your best man. No wonder he's in a lunatic asylum."

My nephew laughed rather uneasily. "Oh, that's just Somers' way. He's a queer old chap, but I'm sure you'll like him, honey."

"I'm not, then! 'Condolences!' The very idea!" Then she chuckled. "After all, it is kind of a funny telegram. Maybe he won't be so sure you need condolences"—very demurely—"after he's seen me!"

"You little minx!" Lewis kissed her soundly. "But really, honey, Floyd Somers is a fine old chap. He may seem queer at first, but, when you get to know him, he's one of the very best."

"Huh!" Dorothy made a little face. "Run along now, boy, and get to work. You're going to have a very expensive wife presently, and you can't afford to neglect your practice."

As we came down the front steps, Doctor Gaskell's big twin-six coupé backed silently out of the garage behind his house, just opposite, and started down street. I caught a glimpse of the doctor's face, incongruously young beneath his crown of snow-white hair; he smiled and raised an arm in greeting.

I lifted my hat. To my mind Gaskell was a fine chap. Some twenty-five years older than Lewis he had been located in Pinelands for more than twenty years, and the cream of the practice was naturally his. But he had been very gracious to my nephew and had sent him more than one case.

Lewis, however, was less grateful. Now he scowled blackly. "Darn his patronizing ways!"

"My boy, he's been awfully good to you."

"Huh? Oh, yes—very good! He's sent me a few dead beats because he was tired of treating them for nothing; and he's turned over half a dozen night calls because he hates to get out of bed. And he goes round saying: 'Parker? Oh, yes, Doctor

Parker. Yes, hum, hum! Fine young chap, that; bright, too. Of course he hasn't had much experience yet.' And it does me more harm than if he'd slam me outright."

I was silenced. So we went on home, only a short block, and the boy got out his modest flivver to begin his own rounds, which were short enough. As I have said, Lewis had been only a year in Pinelands. He was making a living—and no more. Fortunately I had some money.

But he was not destined to make his calls yet. For, just as he climbed into the little car, while I stood on the steps to watch him off, Rosina came panting around the corner.

"Oh, Mist' Lewis!" she wheezed. "Mist' Doctah! Come a-runnin'! Miss Dor'thy's Aunt Ma'y, she's done been took dretful bad." Rosina's eyes rolled fearsomely. "She's a-hollerin' an' a-takin' on terrible. Yassuh! Whyn't you-all answer the phone? Miss Dor'thy, she wants you t' come a-runnin'. Yassuh!"

"Oh, the poor old lady! I'll be there directly. Come along, Uncle George; you can help, maybe. Quick!"

Lewis urged me into the little car and, scarce waiting for me to close its door, started at top speed for Fort House. In thirty seconds the flivver was sliding to a stop, and my nephew leaped out, leaving me to turn off the engine and follow.

I entered to find Aunt Mary in her wheel chair in the big living room. Dorothy, white-faced, stood at one side, wringing her hands; the nurse, Miss

Christie, was behind the chair, bathing the old lady's forehead. As I came in the nurse yawned widely. She did not seem one to distress herself unduly.

Lewis leaned over the chair, counting Miss McGregor's pulse. The old lady was very pale; her eyelids fluttered, her head drooped, as if she were half fainting; she talked in a weak, trembling voice.

"No, I can't go to bed. I can't lie down; I couldn't breathe, my heart pounds so. I—I think I'm going to faint. I have such queer feelings all down my left arm, and my limbs are just numb, way up to the hips. Am I having a stroke, doctor? I'm afraid so. Oh, my heart! There's a great ball in my throat, and the back of my neck knots so terribly! Miss Christie! Not there? Please, rub my neck very gently. Ah-h-h! I'm a great sufferer—a great sufferer! Don't trouble about me, Dorothy —run off and do your shopping. I know you've lots to do, getting ready to be married. Ah, well! I shan't be here long to be a trouble to you!"

She groaned aloud; her face began to twitch alarmingly; her eyes rolled up until only the whites were visible. "I—I'm f-fainting!"

My nephew put his stethoscope to her chest, felt her pulse once more, then stepped back, irresolute.

"Lewis! Lewis!" exclaimed Dorothy. "Aren't you going to do anything for poor auntie? Quick!"

The boy frowned deeper. He opened his bag and produced a bottle. "A spoon, please, with a cup and some hot water."

When they were brought he poured out some potion that diffused a strong scent of ammonia and

ether. Aunt Mary swallowed it with faint gurglings, and her eyelids drooped once more.

Lewis scowled and rubbed his chin. "I don't understand it," he said. "Her heart's all right—strong and regular. But she's in dreadful pain; one can see that. I—I'd like to have somebody else see her. Well, we must get her into bed first."

As she was wheeled back into her own room, where she was shut in with nurse and physician, Dorothy and I looked at each other in some doubt.

"It's no wonder if Lewis is puzzled," declared the girl loyally. "Aunt Mary's is a very unusual case; I don't know how many doctors have disagreed about it. She's often told me so herself." The girl paused, looked guiltily about and then came very close. "You know, Uncle George," she whispered, her fragrant breath on my cheek, "sometimes I wonder if auntie is really as bad off as she thinks. Oh, she's paralyzed, of course, and it's an awful thing to be tied to a chair like she is, not able to stand or walk or do anything for herself. But, I know it's just horrid of me, I do wonder if she suffers as much as she makes out sometimes? I know I stayed with her one night, when Miss Christie was away, and she slept every minute! And next morning she swore up and down she'd never closed her eyes, and she was real mad at me for saying she had."

"Your aunt has a hard time, my dear," I told her. "And——"

Lewis emerged from the sick room, still frowning. "She doesn't seem a bit better. I wish——"

He was staring out of the window at Doctor Gaskell's big car, just stopping in front of his house. "I believe—— Darn it, I hate to ask any favors of Gaskell, but he's older than I am, and he is mighty clever. I believe I'll ask him to come over and see Aunt Mary. Something's got to be done for her right away; she's in dreadful pain, one can see."

Without more words he ran out, calling aloud.

I felt a surge of pride. It must have been hard for Lewis to admit any uncertainty before his best-beloved, and doubly hard to ask aid of Gaskell, whom he disliked so heartily. Yet the boy was big enough to submerge his pride for the sake of his patient's well-being.

"He's a good boy, Dorothy," I whispered, and she nodded, squeezing my hand.

Then Lewis returned, escorting Doctor Gaskell. I had to admit that the latter's very manner inspired confidence. His deep-set eyes were bright and steady, and his smile was disarmingly cordial. He smoothed back his thick, snow-white hair.

"Well, Miss Dorothy! In trouble? We'll go right in, doctor. Have to do something for the old lady right away; can't have her sick now, with a wedding coming on." His smile broadened, and a dimple showed at the corner of his mouth.

Bowing, he turned away, and presently we heard his deep voice in the bedroom. "What? Sitting up? Fine! Hum, hum. Just wheel her back out, nurse. Better light in the big room."

Miss McGregor reappeared in her chair. "She

wouldn't get into bed, doctor," explained Miss Christie. "Said it would kill her to be moved."

"Hum, hum. Not quite that bad," rumbled Doctor Gaskell, chuckling.

Aunt Mary opened one eye to shoot a curiously vindictive glance at him, then she groaned aloud and let her head drop limply forward again.

"Hum, hum, hum," remarked Doctor Gaskell, unmoved. "Let's look at you now."

With swift, practiced hands he made a brief examination; taking the old lady's pulse, listening to her heart, tapping her knees and doing all the mysteriously impressive things that doctors do.

Presently he straightened up. "She's all right," he declared brusquely. "Not a thing the matter with her; a bit tired, that's all. Go to bed, madam, and get a nap, and you'll feel better."

Miss McGregor's head jerked up; she opened her eyes wide and fixed the physician with a baleful glare. I caught my breath in wonder that an old lady so patient and sweet-tempered could be capable of such viciousness.

But it was over in a breath, and Aunt Mary's features had resumed their accustomed expression of suffering sweetness.

"No doubt you're right, doctor. I—I do feel better." So gentle and kindly was her smile that I wondered if my eyes had not deceived me just now. "The worst is over, I hope. I'm in a great deal of pain, but I can bear it!"

She looked so white, so fragile; her weary face, her colorless, quivering lips, told such a tale of

suffering bravely borne that my heart swelled with anger at the callousness of this doctor.

Lewis shared my feelings, I think, for he drew Gaskell to one side and seemed to remonstrate with him in low, angry whispers. The older man shrugged and smiled.

"It's all right, my boy," he answered aloud. "I admire your soft heart, but this is plain hysteria. What? Paralyzed? Oh, yes, she's paralyzed, but she's not suffering. When you've seen as many women as I have with 'knots in the back of their necks,' you'll realize that the best thing to do is treat 'em rough. Sympathy only makes 'em worse; and it's the poor folks that have to live with 'em who really need your sympathy. Hum, hum! You go to bed, madam, and behave yourself. And, if you stop taking out your bad temper on your family, with 'bad spells' like this, you'll feel better —and so will they."

It was brutal—even if it had been true it would have been brutal—but it seemed efficacious. Aunt Mary straightened, with more color in her thin face than I had ever seen there. Her voice was full and strong, not sweet and gentle now, but sharp enough.

"You get out!" she said. "Dorothy, pay him and send him away. You—you're no doctor! I've always said you didn't know your business, insulting poor, helpless women like me!"

My nephew interposed. He was perfectly white, and he trembled visibly.

"Let me, Aunt Mary! Doctor Gaskell, you are a cad, sir! A cad and an ignoramus! You're a dis-

grace to our profession. I—I"—he mouthed inarticulately, almost beside himself with rage—"I—we'll dispense with your services, sir. I may be young and inexperienced, but I'm not heartless. I—I—— Get out, sir!"

I caught the boy's arm. "Softly, Lewis, softly! Don't forget yourself. You'd better go, Doctor Gaskell. I—I'm sorry. I apologize, sir. My nephew is excited."

"Hum," said Doctor Gaskell quite calmly. "Hum, hum! Yes, well—good day!" He bowed to Aunt Mary, to Dorothy, to Lewis, and me, with the most exact courtesy and went out.

"The beast!" exclaimed Lewis.

"Stop that!" I said to him severely. "He may have been wrong; he was too abrupt, no doubt. But he gave his honest opinion; and that's what you wanted, wasn't it? And he showed much more courtesy than you did, my boy."

CHAPTER IV

A FEUD

MY nephew calmed down presently and apologized to the ladies for his outburst. It had been a distressing scene; but, whether it was Doctor Gaskell's rude pronouncement, or excitement, which caused her to forget her troubles, or just coincidence, Aunt Mary seemed much better for it. She replied rather shortly to our questions, saying that she was more comfortable "for the moment," that she didn't want anything, and that she'd lie down a while to recuperate.

Miss Christie wheeled her back again into her bedroom, apparently quite her usual sweetly, patient self. But I was convinced, none the less, that she would not lightly forgive Doctor Gaskell.

Poor Dorothy looked dreadfully flustered. As my nephew left us to give the nurse some last directions, she drew me out into the dining room.

"I—I don't know what to think, Uncle George," she declared. "I know Doctor Gaskell was awfully harsh, and everything like that; and of course Lewis is an awfully good doctor, and I'm sure he knows what he's talking about, but—but, Uncle George, I do believe there was some truth in what Doctor Gaskell said. I do, I *do!* So there! You haven't lived with Aunt Mary a whole year like I have. I do believe she makes out her pains are lots worse

than they are—sometimes; I do believe she likes to have folks say how patient she is, and how she suffers. If she's cross with me, or anything upsets her, I do believe she has one of these bad spells, when other folks would just be cross and cranky. I just do! But you won't tell, will you? You won't breathe it to a soul that I said that, will you, Uncle George? Because, maybe, it's just my meanness, and, besides, Lewis wouldn't like it."

So I promised. Then Lewis appeared, and I went out with him, my own mind considerably unsettled by doubts. On the whole I was inclined to agree with Dorothy that Aunt Mary, despite her repeated claims that she never complained, managed to make the very most of her troubles. My nephew was still incensed; he snorted wrathfully at intervals. I thought it best to keep my suspicions to myself.

"I'll take you down to the post office, unk," he said. "The mail must be in by now, and I've got to stop at the drug store, anyhow."

We went to the latter place first, and the pharmacist, Walter Olsen, hailed my nephew with joy.

"Howdy, doc! Glad you came in. Come on back here."

He stooped over the high prescription counter at the back of the store, his inch-wide blond eyebrows working up and down, as they did when he was puzzled. He was conning over a slip of paper, and this he handed to my nephew.

"See if you can make that out, doc? Gaskell's worse than usual lately; can't read his writing at all.

And he's gone off somewhere, and Satterfield may be in any minute after this."

Lewis took the prescription and studied it for a moment. "Tincture aconite, one drachm," he read. "Bellonia—no, belladonna, a scruple." Then he paused, staring over the paper at the druggist. "Satterfield, did you say? Ralph Satterfield? Why, the Satterfields are my patients! What in thunder does Gaskell mean, stealing my cases?"

He threw the prescription down angrily, his hot temper all aflame. My nephew had a healthy opinion of his own dignity. "I won't waste my time on it!" he flared. "Let Gaskell translate his own scrawls. What a dirty trick, stealing my patients! I never did think much of Gaskell, but I supposed he had some idea of ethics. Wonder if he ever heard of professional etiquette?"

"Now, now, doc," soothed Olsen. He was a mild, pacific chap. "Don't let it upset you. There must be some mistake. Doctor Gaskell wouldn't do that, I'm sure." Stealing another man's patients is one of the high crimes of medicine. "You better just ask him about it; likely Satterfield told him you'd stopped coming."

"Nonsense!" replied Lewis. "I was out there yesterday; I was on my way there this morning. It's the boy, Johnny, isn't it?" He picked up the prescription once more. "John Satterfield! That's my case; I'm treating that boy. Gaskell just butted in on me without a word. Confound him, he's always playing me some dirty trick!"

His voice was high; one or two loafers in the

front of the store heard him and came back to peer over the high screen. Olsen looked troubled.

"Wish I'd let Ralph wait till I could locate Gaskell," Olsen said to me helplessly. "I hate to start trouble like this." He craned his neck to peer over the screen, as the front door opened. "Here's Satterfield coming now!" he announced in vast relief. "You talk to him, doc; see if he don't explain this thing. You can talk right back here."

He beckoned the newcomer and led us to a small storeroom behind the shop. "You-all can talk quiet in there." He cast a worried look at the loungers, who stared and whispered in front of the counter.

I drew my nephew into the room, almost by force. "You cool off, boy," I ordered, "or else let me talk to him. You're making a show of yourself; this thing'll be all over town before night."

Thus adjured, Lewis took a fresh grip on himself and turned more quietly to Satterfield. The latter was a tall, gaunt, slab-sided individual in overalls and a battered slouch hat.

"Look here, Satterfield," he began, "I thought I was taking care of Johnny?"

The other rasped a stubbly chin and pulled at his drooping mustache, in obvious embarrassment.

"We-ell, doc, y'see——" He paused, shuffled his feet and took a fresh start. "W'y, th' woman got kinda panicky yestiddy after you was there. Says th' boy was worse, sez she, an' you was too young, she sez, an' we gotta have Doc Gaskell, 'at she knowed, she sez, an' took care o' her w'en th' kids was borned, sez she."

"Huh. And he came running, didn't he? Glad enough to steal one of my patients from me."

"W'y, no, doc," Satterfield answered. "Couldn't hardly git 'im out there. Says we'd got another doctor, and we'd ought to have him. Wouldn't come until finely I got Bill Sears to' drap you a post card, sayin' we didn't want yuh t' come no longer. Ain't yuh got it yit?"

Lewis glared, open-mouthed, taken aback by this revelation. But I think his anger against Gaskell only burned the brighter for the knowledge that he had done the older man an injustice.

"He's a dirty hound, anyway," he retorted. "And as for you, Satterfield, you must think a lot of yourself, begging help from the man who put you in jail last month."

The other reddened, scowling sullenly. "That's between him an' me," he said.

Gaskell was one of the town commissioners, and he had been acting mayor for two months, during the absence of Frank Hayes. And, when Satterfield had been brought before him, charged with bootlegging, Gaskell had given the countryman thirty days on the roads.

"That's between him an' me," said Satterfield. "Cain't nobody send me to th' jail house 'ithout payin' f'r it. I'll settle with Doc Gaskell yit—you see! But that ain't got nothin' t' do with this here; we-all quit doctorin' with you an' sent f'r Doc Gaskell, see? Yuh got anythin' t' say about that, huh?"

He glared belligerently at Lewis. I fancy that his

own conscience was something less than easy, which naturally made him irritable.

"No, no!" I told him. "It's all right; the doctor is perfectly satisfied. Come along, Lewis!"

My aged nerves had stood all they could this morning. I hurried my nephew out of the place before he could start a new quarrel. At last I got the boy off on his rounds, in a tolerably calm frame of mind, and I walked slowly back to the house.

My heart was heavy. Unless he learned to curb his hot temper Lewis could not hope to do well here. In any open break the sympathy of the townspeople would naturally go to Doctor Gaskell, the older and better-known man. Lewis would suffer, whatever the merits of the case. It worried me deeply.

As I turned onto our street, I noticed a team of mules standing before Doctor Gaskell's house, and a deep, angry roar drew my eyes to his front porch.

A huge old man, bearded to the waist, stood on the doctor's porch, a wide-brimmed felt hat thrust far back on his massive head. He was shouting at a thoroughly frightened negro maid.

"Out, huh? Gone away, huh? He better be gone away! Where's he at, huh?"

"G-gone to th' h-hospital, suh," answered the girl in a quavering voice. "He's done gone, suh; ain't gwine be back ontwel evenin'."

"Huh?" A terrifying snort shook the air. "You tell 'em this word f'om me, f'om Lafe Rutledge, gyurl. Tell 'im he's got till sunup t' settle, an' that's

all. I'll be down to th' Pinelands Hotel all evenin'. Ontel sunup, you hear me?"

"Yassuh! Oh, yassuh. I shore will tell th' doctah!"

The giant snorted once more, tugged at his flowing beard and turned away. His heavy cowhide boots stamped down the steps; then he clambered into his wagon, gathered the lines and lashed his mules to a run.

Well, Doctor Gaskell's troubles were his own. I was more concerned with my nephew's, and I feared that his hot temper would provide plenty for him.

CHAPTER V

A TRAGEDY

THE rest of that day passed uneventfully enough. When he returned from his rounds Lewis seemed quite himself again, and that afternoon he went off to Raleigh cheerfully enough, to hurry the tailor with his wedding clothes.

The wedding was to be on Wednesday, at noon; but Dorothy had planned a rehearsal for Monday, when her Brother Peter would be back, and Lewis' best man, Doctor Somers, would be here. And Tuesday would be a very busy day, what with receiving and caring for the many out-of-town guests. Saturday was the boy's last chance to get his new clothes.

Peter McGregor would not return until Sunday afternoon, so it was arranged that I should stay at Fort House another night. I did not look forward to it with any great joy; but I hoped that the Poltergeist would allow me a few hours' rest, though I could hardly look for a like forbearance from bob-white.

The evening went off tolerably well. Aunt Mary was quite cheerful, and she had surprisingly little to say about her throat and her "limbs" and the knots in the back of her neck. I dozed comfortably in a big sleepy-hollow chair, half listening to Dorothy's chatter over some intimate bit of finery.

And the nurse, Miss Christie, slept quite frankly on a couch in the corner. She was never at a loss how to spend her time.

At last Dorothy threw her embroidery frame at me. "Go to bed, Uncle George! You haven't heard one thing I've been saying for an hour. You poor thing! You're all tired out."

I rubbed my eyes. "Indeed I have; I was very much interested. But, perhaps, I'd better go to bed now. First, though, I must get out Peter's shotgun and set it beside the back door, where Lewis can get it in the morning. He's going after those quail, you know, and he made me promise to set out the gun. He won't be back till midnight."

"It's up in Peter's room. Come along, I'll show you. But you'll have to load it and all that, Uncle George. I don't know a thing about guns."

Aunt Mary sniffed. "It used to be the pride of the McGregors of Maryland that the ladies of the family were all thorough sportswomen. Many have been the days I spent riding to hounds, when I was your age, Dorothy; on many a morning I turned out early with my gun for duck shooting, or to go out with the dogs after quail. I never asked any help to care for my guns, either. But that's long, long ago, and here I am, a poor, crippled old woman, tied to a chair, these fourteen years. Ah, well! Young folks aren't what they were in my day!"

Her lips trembled; her eyes suffused with tears. Fearing another outbreak like the one of the morning I cast about me for some new topic. Just then two powerful lights flashed briefly through the win-

dows and vanished again. I glanced out; Doctor Gaskell's big car had just swept round the corner toward his garage.

"The doctor's back," said I casually. "Wonder if he's seen Lafe Rutledge."

"Who?"

I jumped at the sudden, sharp question and wheeled. Miss Christie, whom I had supposed asleep, as usual, had leaped up from her couch and stood facing me, half crouched. For once her eyes were wide open; her round, dimpled face was pale and drawn; her hands, clasped at her breast, trembled.

"Who did you say?"

"Why," I answered, wondering, "a man called Rutledge. He was asking for Doctor Gaskell this morning, as I came past. The doctor was out, but he left a message. I heard it; nobody within half a mile could have helped hearing it. Said his name was Lafe Rutledge, and he'd give the doctor until sunup to settle—whatever that means."

"Oh!" exclaimed the nurse, and the vivid horror in her face made her suddenly beautiful. I had never noticed her looks before; she was so sleepily indifferent; but now fear transfigured her.

"Oh, Lafe Rutledge! Are you sure? A great, big old man, with a long beard?"

"And a voice like the bull of Bashan—and enormous boots! Yes, that's the gentleman."

Without another word Miss Christie ran to the door, bareheaded as she was, and tore it open.

"Miss Christie! Nurse!" It was Aunt Mary's voice, sharp, domineering, and angry. "What do

you mean by this? Come back here at once! Take me to my room!"

The girl never glanced back. "In a minute," she answered. "I can't stop now. I'll come back directly." The door slammed after her.

We three stared at each other. "Well!" cried Dorothy. "What do you suppose waked her up?"

Aunt Mary bridled. "Ungrateful minx! What does she mean by it, leaving me this way? I'm tired, and I want her to rub my limbs at once!"

"She'll be right back, I'm sure," said Dorothy. "Something upset her; she must be afraid of this man Rutledge for some reason. The poor girl looked scared to death."

"She should consider me," insisted Miss McGregor inexorably. "I have enough to bear, without my nurse rushing off and cutting up like this. This settles it! She shall go, as soon as I can find some one to take her place! I never liked her; I might have known that any one whom that wretch Gaskell recommended would be untrustworthy."

"Oh," said I, wondering, "Doctor Gaskell sent her here?"

Dorothy nodded. "Miss O'Brien had to leave, and we got this nurse through Doctor Gaskell. She comes from the western part of the State, up in the mountains somewhere, near the Tennessee border."

The front door opened, and Miss Christie reappeared, rather out of breath, but sleepily calm as ever.

"You have upset me seriously," declared Aunt Mary severely. "My limbs tingle, and the knots

are coming in my neck. Take me to my room at once. What do you mean by dashing off this way?"

Her voice was harsh, almost abusive. I sighed a little, to think how intimacy was shattering my faith in Aunt Mary's saintliness. It was a myth, I began to suspect. Behind the old lady's angelic front lurked a temper quite the reverse of angelic.

"I'm sorry, Miss McGregor," answered the nurse meekly. "I had to go; it was a matter of life and death, almost."

Aunt Mary sniffed. "Life and death, indeed! How about my life and death? But that's of no importance, I suppose: I'm only a poor, helpless old woman that everybody'll be glad to get rid of." Then yielding, I suppose, to the curiosity which touched us all, she asked: "What did you run off for, anyway?"

"I can't tell you." The girl's sleepy face set determinedly.

"Mf!" exclaimed Aunt Mary. "I don't like mysteries. I'll give you until morning; then you can explain—or leave!"

"Very well, Miss McGregor. Shall I take you to your room now?"

She pushed the wheeled chair out, and Dorothy, still wide-eyed, beckoned to me. "Come along, Uncle George. Let's get the shotgun. What do you suppose ailed Miss Christie?"

I shrugged. "She's from the mountains. They still have feuds out there, you know, along the North Carolina border. Perhaps this fellow Rutledge comes from her home, and she's afraid he'll do some

mischief down here. Maybe she'll explain herself in the morning, unless Aunt Mary is too cranky."

Dorothy shivered a little. "I don't like mysteries, either," she confessed. "And there's trouble coming, Uncle George; I can feel it. Oh, dear! I wish we were out of Fort House for good! Everything's going wrong. That horrid ghost, or whatever it is, scared me about sick; and then Lewis had to go and quarrel with Doctor Gaskell, and now Miss Christie begins to act so queer, and—and everything. Oh, dear! I wish all these things could have happened to some other body. Here's Peter's gun, Uncle George, in this closet."

I took it out, a plain, well-used, double-barreled shotgun. Then I broke it to make sure it was unloaded.

"There's a box of shells on the shelf, I think. Come on, let's leave it out and go to bed. I'm tired, too."

She led the way down the back stairs. After making sure that both barrels were unloaded I set the gun against the angle of the wall on the back porch, just inside the screen door.

"There! I told Lewis I'd put it there. I'll just leave the cartridges beside it, with the cleaning rod and rags, so he can put the gun in shape when he's through with it. I hope he gets those miserable quail; they kept me awake, too."

"Poor Uncle George! He's having a hard time, taking care of the McGregor family, isn't he?" she stood on tiptoe to kiss the end of my nose, then she ran in. "I'm going to bed, too," she called back.

But as I labored up the front stairs—slowly enough, for my joints were very stiff—she came out of Miss McGregor's room to call after me.

"Uncle George! Auntie's nervous about that gun. Come in and tell her where you left it."

I turned back. "On the back porch, Miss McGregor, inside the screen door."

"Is it loaded?" querulously she asked.

"No, ma'am. I set the box of shells beside it, ready."

"Like as not we'll all be murdered in our beds, but I'd run that chance even to get rid of those quail. Good night!"

"Good night!" I resumed my interrupted climb.

If the Poltergeist paid us a visit that night I did not know it. I could scarcely keep my eyes open long enough to undress. I was tired out, and the bed felt grateful enough. I slept sound and dreamlessly, which is rather unusual for me, until about half past three. Then I half woke, to hear the matutinal song—screech, rather—of those pestiferous quail. I grinned sleepily, wondering if Aunt Mary had been awakened, too; wondering how soon Lewis would be along, and whether he would bag them.

Then I dropped off again, to dream that Lewis was stalking a covey of sitting quail in my bedroom. They perched on the footboard; I struggled hopelessly, as one does in dreams, to cry out, to warn him that I was in his line of fire. I could not make a sound. Presently he raised his gun, and I saw that it was a cannon, a field piece, with a muzzle as big around as my head. He pulled the trigger

—the thing went off with a most horrible racket and blew the whole house apart. I seemed to be sailing straight up into the air, with Lafe Rutledge beside me, his great white beard fluttering. "There'll be no wedding now," I told him. Then Aunt Mary McGregor came along, wearing roller skates, and explained that she could get around better that way than in the wheel chair, and so she had given the latter to Dorothy. And Rosina appeared, eyes rolling as if on swivels, and said: "Come a-runnin'! Lafe's eloped with Miss Dor'thy!"

Just then I woke up, laughing aloud at the absurdity of it all. It was broad daylight; my watch said five o'clock. The quail still whistled persistently. I got up and went to the window, wondering if Lewis had come yet; this would be a fine time to flush those birds. I was almost tempted, in spite of my rheumatic joints, to slip down myself.

The early sun struck through the tall pines and showed a moving figure among them. Lewis was prompt evidently. He stepped out from the little grove into the scrub-oak tangle behind it, gun at the ready. Then he seemed to stumble.

The shotgun came halfway to his shoulder, as if for a snapshot, steadied, its barrel pointing straight ahead—and flamed! The heavy roar of black powder reached my ears on the heels of the flash.

"Good boy!" I cried aloud. "Get him?"

Lewis took one step forward, then staggered back, dropping his gun; both hands went to his face. It was too far to see what had happened; too far even

to shout a query from the open window. I turned away, my heart throbbing, to hunt for my clothes.

Then a stentorian shout brought me back, gasping, gripped by a premonition of evil. Surely the boy could not have shot himself! The muzzle of the gun had pointed well away from him.

"Hey, there!" roared the same minatory voice, now closer. "What you-all up to? Lay off o' that there shootin' in th' corporation!"

A huge figure threaded its way through the pines, following the path that led from one street to the other, a favorite short cut for pedestrians. It was our constable, Rufe Wakefield, a tremendous man, whose apparent ferocity cloaked a rather timorous heart, so folk whispered.

He repeated his challenge, and now he was through the grove and beside Lewis.

"What you up to?" he demanded, and his leonine roar seemed louder than the recent shot.

Then he leaped back, both hands thrown up; presently he came forward again and picked up my nephew's fallen gun. They talked together; Wakefield was accusing, Lewis apparently protesting; both were much agitated. At last they turned and came slowly back toward the house.

I could bear it no longer. I leaned far out of the window. "Say!" I shouted, at the pitch of my lungs. "Hello, down there! What's wrong?"

Wakefield looked up. "Murder's wrong!" he called excitedly. "This feller's done shot Doc Gaskell. Killed 'im daid!"

CHAPTER VI

UNCERTAINTY

I STAGGERED back. "What, murdered? Doctor Gaskell murdered! What's that about Lewis? You wait right there, Rufe, till I get dressed."

Without waiting to see whether he would obey, I turned from the window and groped excitedly for my trousers. From the look of him, I fancied that the constable would be glad of some guidance, even from me; he seemed as flustered and at sea as poor Lewis himself.

I dragged on my trousers over my pajamas, thrust bare feet into a pair of slippers, and hurried out into the hall, my coat on my arm.

"Uncle George!"

It was a very shaky, frightened little voice. Dorothy, swathed in a blue woolen robe, looking like a sleepy schoolgirl, with her black hair in braids, clutched at my arm.

"Uncle George, what is it? What's happened? You can't go out like that—you'll catch your death!"

I must have presented an odd figure: bare-ankled, suspenders hanging about my hips, a lavender pajama coat much in evidence. But I was too upset to laugh at myself.

"Let me go, child; there's something wrong outside."

I had some vague thought of shielding her but her big eyes widened, as she grew very white.

"Oh!" she exclaimed. "Lewis! Lewis is hurt—Lewis is killed, and you're afraid to tell me!"

"No, no! It's Gaskell—Doctor Gaskell's been hurt. I don't know what has happened, but I'm going to find out. Let me go, child. Lewis is all right, I tell you. Look out of the window, and you can see him."

Then I broke away, to limp and stumble down the stairs at top speed, hoping I had pacified her; hoping she might go back to bed; hoping I could settle this thing, get Wakefield away from the window before Dorothy could hear that her fiancé was accused of murder.

I plunged out of the door and raced around to the east side of the house. Here I found Lewis and the constable, side by side, staring silently at nothing. They turned to me helplessly.

"Well!" I began impatiently. "What is it? What's happened? Don't stand there staring like dummies—tell me!"

Their befuddlement angered me; though, indeed, what with excitement, rheumatic twinges, and the breathless hurry of my coming, I fear I was in little better case myself.

My nephew sighed heavily, as if awakened from an evil dream. "Come along, unk," he invited.

"Yeah," said the gigantic constable, "c'm' on, an' see what he done!"

I followed them along the little winding path, through the pines and into the tangle of scrub oaks; there I stopped, gasping. Before me, supine, inert, lay the body of Doctor Gaskell. His face was deadly

white, his features sharpened curiously. He was fully dressed, and one hand still clutched a small black bag. He lay on his back among the thick bushes, his feet still in the little path. In the very center of his body, just above the belt, was a horrid, gaping wound, about which his white shirt was all tattered and stained.

Needlessly I knelt and put my hand over his heart. It was quite still; and his skin was cold already. I rose stiffly.

"Good heavens," I said. "Lewis——"

"Yeah, Lewis! I sh'd think so," declared the constable. "George, ain't this terrible?" He gripped the boy's shoulder. "What'd ye do it f'r, huh?"

Lewis shook off his hand. "I—I didn't," he said thickly. His lips were stiff, and his tongue seemed unmanageable. "I didn't—or, anyway, I didn't know." He groaned aloud. "I don't know what happened. I thought I saw a quail, and I cocked the gun and started to raise it, and then I stumbled, and it went off. He must have been coming through the bushes; I never saw him, or heard him—or anything. He never made a sound! I supposed I was all alone out here until I heard Rufe yell; then I jumped and looked round, and there he was—dead! You believe me, don't you, unk?"

"Huh?" asked Wakefield. "Sounds kinda fishy t' me." He pointed down at the body accusingly. "Hit plumb center," he pronounced. "With a shotgun, too; anybody c'd see that. An' right close up! See th' powder marks? Musta seed him!"

"He didn't, either!" I put in. "I was watching

from that window up there; I saw Lewis raise his gun and trip, just like he said. Gaskell wasn't in sight, or anybody else!"

"Huh!" asked the constable again. "We-ell, it's kinda queer, anyways; 'specially after th' way Doc Parker here was talkin' in to Olsen's yestiddy. Yeah"—as I shrunk from the memory of the boy's careless threats—"I was there and heerd 'im m'self, making threats agin' Doc Gaskell. I reckon you'll have a right smart o' explainin' t' do, Parker!"

"Well," I said, "don't let's argue about it now. We'll have to look after the body, and—whatever it is they do when anybody's found dead this way."

I looked questioningly at the constable, and he stared blankly back. The habitual fierceness of his huge face was marred somewhat by a shifting, uncertain eye. He fingered his chin irresolutely, and gazed about as for inspiration.

I scratched my head. Plainly there was no help in him. "I suppose," I began doubtfully, "I suppose the coroner ought to be notified and the sheriff——"

Wakefield brightened. Here was a chance to shift unwanted responsibility. "Th' sheriff? Yeah!" he said. "Sure! I'll go phone 'im right away."

He started off, then paused and turned back. "I —I s'pose I'd oughta 'rest 'im, hadn't I?" he asked, looking at me as for advice on the matter. "I'd oughta 'rest 'im an' take 'im to th' lockup first, mebbe."

For all the gravity of the situation, I had to laugh. He was so ludicrously inept, this huge, ferocious-looking constable.

"Nonsense!" said I. "Lewis won't run away. I'll be responsible for him. We'll come along while you phone; that'll be the best way. And, when Redden comes, you can turn my nephew right over to him."

"We-ell. If you think that's th' best way." Then the constable started toward Fort House.

"No, not in there," I said. "It would upset Miss McGregor terribly. She's an invalid, you know." Really, it was Dorothy whom I wished to spare. "We'd better go across to Gaskell's house."

That started a new doubt in Mr. Wakefield's slow mind. He stopped again. "I don't know as we'd oughta leave th' body there all alone," he declared. "Mebbe we better go back an'——"

"Nonsense!" I exclaimed. "We can go back and wait there as soon as you've notified Sheriff Redden. Come along, now!" Then I dragged him on by main force.

Fortunately, Mrs. Gaskell was away, so we had not to break the dreadful news to her. A frightened colored maid, just opening the back door, for it was still early, showed us to the telephone, and Wakefield called for the county jail.

We claimed Pinelands for the county seat, but the courthouse and jail of Carabas County were not in the town. When the new buildings were projected some ten years before there was a bitter rivalry between Pinelands and Smyrna, five miles off, for the honor of possessing them. And finally, to settle this, the jail and courthouse were built upon the dividing line of the two townships, over two miles from either village. This singular arrangement, of

course, pleased neither contingent. But there our courthouse stood, alone in the wilderness, and I know of one other similar case in North Carolina.

The sheriff lived in the jail, which made this a long-distance call. We had to wait for ten minutes or so to get a connection.

"Hello!" said Wakefield. "Hello! Th' jail? . . . Gimme th' high sheriff. Huh? . . . This here's Rufe Wakefield, over to Pinelands. . . . Yeah, Const'ble Wakefield. Hello, sheriff? . . . They's been a killin' here—Doc Gaskell's done been shot. . . . Huh? . . . Yeah, I got th' feller did it. . . . Huh? . . . Bring 'im out there? Nossir! I ain't got no author'ty outside th' corporation, an', anyways, I ain't a-goin' to. . . . Huh? . . . Nossir! . . . Huh?"

I pushed him aside; I could see that he was getting nowhere. "Hello! Sheriff? . . . George Uhlman speaking. . . . Yes, Doctor Parker's uncle. We just found Doctor Gaskell out here in the bushes, near his house, dead. He'd been killed with a shotgun. We don't know how it happened; looks like an accident. Wakefield thinks my nephew did it, but I don't! Anyway, it's not clear, and it needs investigation. There's nobody here fit to take charge. Will you come right over, please?"

"W'y sure!" came the sheriff's high, whining falsetto. "I s'posed f'om Rufe it wa'n't nothin', on'y just a plain killin'. Be over directly. You sent f'r th' coroner?"

"No; we just found the body."

"Aw right! I'll git Doc Burgess f'om Smyrna an' carry him over there. Git started soon as I c'n git my clothes on." His shrill voice took on an injured note. "Wisht you-all'd have y'r killin's later in the day!"

We went out into the fresh, bright morning, and walked toward the pine grove. Even now Pinelands was scarcely awake. Thin curls of smoke began lazily to mount from a chimney here and there; a colored servant or two hurried up the street, fresh from Jimtown, across the creek. In an hour they would be serving breakfast; the orderly life of Pinelands would begin behind those white colonnaded house fronts, which were now so still. It came to me as a shock, that peaceful life should be going on all about, when I seemed caught into the whirl of another world altogether—a fantastic, unreal world of sudden death and police officers and all the sordid routine of criminal investigation. Perhaps I felt the whole affair as deeply as Lewis did. I was fond of my nephew.

We passed under Aunt Mary's window, and I could hear Miss Christie's undisturbed snoring. There was no sound from Miss McGregor herself, although the quail still whistled piercingly. I wondered if she could really be asleep—if, perhaps, the bobwhites disturbed her less than she fancied. Surely, with the shouting which had followed that fateful explosion of Peter McGregor's shotgun, even a sound sleeper might well have been awakened.

But one, at least, in Fort House, was stirring. As we passed the corner of the old place Dorothy

ran out, breathless, hastily dressed, but distractingly pretty. Her thick braids were coiled carelessly on her head; as she came toward us she thrust a hairpin home.

"Oh, Lewis! What is it, boy? What's happened? I just know it's something terrible!"

"There, there, honey!" With a vast effort the boy shook himself into a semblance of calm, and put an arm about her protectingly. "It's nothing! There's been an accident, and Doctor Gaskell is hurt."

"Hurt?" She drew away from him a little, looking deep into his eyes. "Oh, boy, boy! You didn't quarrel with him again?"

"No. I—I didn't know he was there, dear. I never saw or heard a thing. And the gun went off, and——"

"Did you hit him? Is he hurt badly? Where is he? Can't I help?"

"Nobody can help him now," I told her gravely. "The only way you can help is to go back in the house and try to keep this from Aunt Mary as long as you can. No!" I caught her sharply back, as she would have run down the path. "You can't do anything there; you must keep away."

She stared at me in agony. "You—you mean he's dead?" She seemed unable to understand; her face was quite blank. Indeed, all of us seemed helplessly confused that fateful morning. I look back now and see how we might have risen to the occasion, how we might have handled the situation efficiently; but then we all seemed bound by the

same nightmare, gripped by that terrible helplessness of dreams, so that we could only stare and gape. After all, it was no wonder! Doctor William Gaskell had been killed in a very sudden and dreadful fashion—and my nephew, Lewis Parker, was supposed to have killed him, however unintentionally. And we loved the boy.

"We-ell," said Dorothy uncertainly, "I'll try and be good. You come with me, Lewis, please."

"I—I'm needed here," he began, but Constable Wakefield's stentorian voice drowned his evasion.

"He's gotta stay right with me, ma'am," he declared. "He's under arrest, he is, f'r murder!" He inflated his huge chest importantly, then shrank suddenly back, fumbling at his hip, as my nephew turned upon him. "Here, here! None o' that, now!"

"You fool!" said the boy. "I've a good mind to break your head—blurting out that way."

"Quit, quit!" The constable tried to hide his vast bulk behind me, and his voice shook. Here was a desperate criminal, a red-handed murderer, threatening him! I read the thought in the sickly face of him. "You-all make him quit! Resistin' a officer's serious, Parker!"

Lewis had forgotten him already. His eyes were all for Dorothy. "It—it was an accident!" he declared piteously. "Dorothy—honey—you believe me, don't you? I never even saw him; I supposed he was home in bed. Oh, honey, you don't think I really meant to shoot him?"

The girl's eyes shone, and she brushed the thought away with a magnificent gesture. "Of course not!

But, Lewis, boy, arrested! W-will they put you in j-jail, dearest? They won't keep you there, will they? Why, our wedding's only two days off!"

"Come, dear," I urged. "Run in, now. See, people are coming already. It's only a formality" —how I hoped it was not a lie—"just a form. He'll be out again and back in time for dinner. You go look after Aunt Mary and be brave."

She turned away obediently, her slender shoulders shaking with sobs; then she came back to kiss the boy, and fled. I sighed with relief as she vanished into the house. "Come on, Wakefield, let's get it over," I suggested.

Already the news had spread. Perhaps it had been the telephone operator, perhaps the mysterious wireless of small-town gossip. Anyhow men and boys had begun to collect, to hang in whispering groups along the road. A few bolder spirits advanced, full of questions, and followed us back along the path to where Gaskell's body still lay.

"How come?" asked one man of the constable, who stood beside Lewis, still rubbing his chin with unsteady fingers. He had made no move to lift the dead man.

"How come? Doc Parker, here, done it with his shotgun just now. I as good as seen him!"

The constable's statement was relayed from one whispering group to another. The crowd gathered, came closer, jostling and shoving through the scrub for a better look. A little murmur started somewhere and grew into a menacing growl: "Killed Doc Gaskell! Shot 'im down deliberate! Dirty coward!"

A high, excited voice from the rear shouted: "He ought to be lynched!"

At that sinister suggestion the crowd began to mill. The mutter of unfriendly voices deepened, grew more ominous. "Git a rope!" exclaimed another. Suddenly there was an outburst of howls, shrill, bitter, inhuman, like the baying of hounds. "Git a rope! Git a rope! Hang 'im—lynch 'im!"

Pushing and crowding, they drew closer, surrounding us and the body, treading down the bushes, thrusting aside saplings. I looked into a circle of flushed, ugly faces. The crowd had become a mob.

Constable Wakefield straightened to the full of his six feet two, thrust out his official chest and glowered at them fiercely. "Stand back, boys!" he ordered. "Don't interfere with th' law!"

His authoritative way had its effect for an instant; then some one laughed. "Yah, Rufe! 'Member when Ralph Satterfield took y'r star off of yuh that day? Knock his block off, fellers; take 'is gun away, if he starts anythin'. He ain't got the nerve to shoot." Wakefield had now produced a huge and ancient pistol.

The big man paled, and his small eyes shifted uncertainly. His heavy, bullying voice quavered. "Now, now, boys," he said, suddenly pacific, "don't do nothin' you'll be sorry for."

"Gr-r-r-r!" The crowd swayed forward. Lewis, very white, clenched his fists and crouched, prepared to sell his life dearly. I stood in front of him; I would come to grips with Nate Buford who was nearest me; I could hold him back for a min-

ute, at least. And, even in that breathless moment, I had to grin to myself to think of pitting my puny, rheumatic sixty-odd years against the wrath of a mob.

Presently the crowd began to waver. "Beat it!" shouted some one from the rear. Those nearest us shifted, looked over shoulders, then stepped back, each trying to hide behind his fellows and look like an innocent bystander. A wide lane opened, and along it a shrunken, undistinguished figure advanced toward us. It was a little old man, stooped and bent, whose rheumy, red-rimmed eyes peered mildly from beneath a wide, flapping hat brim; his lean, leathery face, seamed by a thousand wrinkles, was made ludicrous by the merest wisp of straggling white mustache; the gnarled, calloused hands swung empty at his sides. It was High Sheriff Redden, and glad I was to see him.

He came on through the shrinking, melting crowd and stood with us, peering down at Doctor Gaskell's quiet body. "H'm," said he. "Daid, ain't he?"

He spoke in a quavering, cracked falsetto. Then he turned and ran a mild, watery eye over the throng, stroking his ridiculous, wispy mustache the while. "Seems like I heerd some racketin' round here," he went on in that grotesque, squeaky whine. "You-all c'n go home now. Git! Scatter!"

His bent, shrunken form contrasted absurdly with the constable's massiveness; his voice, to the constable's roar, was a penny whistle to a pipe organ. His rheumy eyes were mild, almost timid; his gnarled hands were empty.

But none withstood him. The crowd melted fast, each man looking, or trying to look, as if he'd just stopped for a minute and was ready to go, anyway. Presently Lewis and I stood alone with the constable, the sheriff, and the dead man.

I conceived a sincere respect for High Sheriff Redden.

CHAPTER VII

INVESTIGATION

SHERIFF REDDEN, at least, seemed quite untouched by the paralysis of thought which held us all. He cleared his throat briskly, ran a watery eye over our blank visages, and stooped over the dead man.

"H'm," said he. "Plumb center—with a shotgun, held clost enough to scorch his shirt some. Who found him?"

A quail, whistled sharply, as if in mockery, and its shrill note struck exactly the key of the high sheriff's squeaky voice. It was ridiculous enough, yet none of us seemed moved to laugh. Indeed, I valued the sheriff's intelligence the higher, that he asked: "Who found him?" instead of "Who did it?"

"I found him!" answered Lewis and the constable, almost together. "That is——" and both stopped short.

"You first," ordered the sheriff, flipping a calloused palm at my nephew. And he listened attentively, his wizen, wrinkled face inscrutable, while the boy told his faltering tale.

"I was coming down the path, and I thought I saw a quail on that limb, right there. I cocked the gun and started to raise it; and then I tripped, and it went off. But I didn't see a soul or hear a sound; I swear I didn't!"

"H'm," said Sheriff Redden, blinking his little, red-rimmed eyes. "H'm! What was you doin' out here with a gun, right in th' village?"

"It was the quail," said Lewis. He seemed dazed, incapable of thought. He began to repeat his story: "I was coming down the path——"

"The birds annoyed Miss McGregor so much she couldn't sleep. She's an invalid, you know." And I told him of Aunt Mary's complaints and my nephew's promise.

"H'm," repeated the sheriff. "So you come out t' kill off them pa'tridge? H'm! Didn't look t' see Doc Gaskell out here? What was th' doc doin' in McGregors' back yard that time o' mornin', yuh s'pose?"

"Somebody sick, probably," I answered. "He had his medicine case, you see."

The sheriff blinked down at the black bag, which Gaskell's dead hand still gripped. "H'm! Like enough. We c'n see after that later. Hey, Burgess!"

He turned toward the street, whence came a reply to his shrill summons. A battered roadster stood in front of Fort House, and a stout, middle-aged man, bearded thickly, was just climbing out of it. He held a stout satchel.

"Doc Burgess, th' coroner," explained the sheriff. "Better let him have a look fust; then we c'n take th' body home."

The coroner came toward us briskly, with a fat man's rolling gait. He set down his bag and knelt beside the dead man, grunting.

His examination took but a moment. "Stone dead," he announced, and his thick beard moved to the words. "Never knew what hit him. Must have dropped where he stood. All right, you can move him now, sheriff. I'd better have a complete autopsy done, I suppose, though I'd be ready to swear to the cause of death right now."

"H'm! How long's he bin daid, you reckon?"

Doctor Burgess touched the dead man's breast, moved an arm tentatively. "We-ell, two hours, anyhow—maybe longer. Can't say exactly."

The sheriff looked at his watch. "Seven-fifteen. You was out here at five, Parker?"

I nodded. "I'd looked at my watch just a minute before I saw him shoot."

"Saw him shoot?" the sheriff repeated. "Where was you?"

"Up at that window, looking out."

"H'm! You see Doc Gaskell?"

"No. There wasn't a soul in sight. The bushes didn't move even."

"H'm," repeated the sheriff. "Well, let's git goin'."

He beckoned to a lounger, who had retreated only to the street, and presently a couple of boards were found. Constable and coroner lifted the dead man gently, and four volunteers carried him away toward his own house. The bright sun shone down as cheerily as if all had been well in Pinelands; and the quail whistled "bob*white!* bob*white!*" without faltering upon a single note. To my disturbed mind, they seemed to jeer at us, to rejoice in this tragedy which they had caused.

"Rufe, you go over an' stay with th' body," said the sheriff. "Keep all them folks away. I gotta git word t' Mis' Gaskell, an' find out where the doc was goin', an'——"

"He was coming to my place, sheriff." It was Olsen, the druggist, who spoke. He had joined the ragged fringe of curious ones who still hung about, but at a respectful distance. "My little girl woke up with awful pains in her stomach, and we phoned after the doctor. Say, Redden, isn't this a dreadful thing!"

"H'm," said the sheriff. "Somebody oughta let Mis' Gaskell know about it. Whereabouts is she, Olsen? Do you know?"

"Why, yes; she went to Jackson Springs for a few days with the Ruggleses. I'll take care of that, sheriff; I'll send for Mrs. Gaskell, and the lodge will make arrangements for the funeral and all."

"All right, you-all c'n see to that end of it. An' now"—the sheriff turned a quizzical, blinking eye upon me—"th' next mos' important thing seems t' be, when do we eat?"

The old gentleman was bearing himself with extraordinary courtesy and kindliness, I thought. He kept a keen, faded eye upon Lewis, of course; he saw to it that the boy did not wander far from his side, but he had not so much as mentioned that he was under arrest.

"Come over to our house," I invited. "I expect Rosina can scrape us up something."

We were standing by the corner of the Fort House

porch; and now a sweet, tremulous voice from above cut across my words.

"Of course not! You come right in here, Uncle George, and bring Lewis and these—these gentlemen —both of them. Breakfast is waiting for you."

We started, and I looked up. Dorothy McGregor leaned over the porch rail, smiling down at us bravely, if tearfully—a vision of loveliness. The old sheriff swept off his broad-brimmed hat and bowed with old-fashioned courtesy; the coroner bowed also, a pleased smile upon his grave, bearded face.

"I thank you, ma'am. Sorry to intrude on you-all, but I reckon we better accept yo'r kind invitation. Yuh see, ah—circumstances is such—well, I gotta stay with Doctor Parker, ma'am, f'r th' present, or I wouldn't butt in on you-all this a way."

He stammered, wiping his leathery old face in sincere embarrassment. Though they had never met, the sheriff knew Dorothy, as did every one else in town. He knew that she was about to be married to my nephew, and he dreaded to tell her that the boy was under arrest.

But he need not have been troubled. Dorothy met him at the steps, still smiling courageously, despite trembling lips, and gave him a cordial hand. "Mr. Redden, isn't it? Of course I know who you are, sheriff, and I understand that you've had to arrest Lewis. But it's only for a day or so, isn't it?" she asked. "Just until he's cleared, or whatever you call it? And it's just sweet of you, sheriff, to let him come in for a little while before he—g-goes."

"H'm! Yessum, jus' f'r a little while, o' course.

I—I—this is Doc Burgess, Miss Dorothy, a—a friend o' mine."

"How do you do, doctor? Now come in, everybody. The waffles will be ready, and it makes Rosina awfully mad if they have to stand a minute."

She led the way to the dining room, still chattering bravely, but I saw how her hand trembled upon Lewis' arm.

Dorothy seated us all about the big, round table, and breakfast was served at once. Conversation languished, as one might have expected; but the officers paid enough attention to Rosina's cooking to balance the scant appetites of the family.

"Where's Aunt Mary?" I whispered to the girl beside me. I wondered how the old lady would react to this rude upsetting of the routine of life at Fort House.

"In her room," Dorothy answered. She made no pretense of eating, but sat close to Lewis, holding his hand openly and proudly, murmuring comfort to him. "She hasn't come out at all; I don't believe she knows anything about—this."

While Dorothy was speaking, the portières were pushed back, and Aunt Mary McGregor appeared, bolt upright in her wheel chair, propelled, as usual, by her yawning nurse. Our unwelcome guests rose.

The old lady's thin, arched eyebrows rose higher than ever. She blinked her eyes very fast, an unfailing sign of irritation, as I was beginning to learn.

"Good morning!" she said very coldly indeed. "And who are these—ah—gentlemen, Dorothy?"

Flushed and embarrassed, Dorothy rose also.

"Why—why, aunty, these are friends of Lewis. This is Sheriff Redden; my aunt, Miss McGregor, Mr. Redden. And Doctor——"

"Indeed!" Aunt Mary's frosty voice cut her off. The old lady's eyebrows rose higher yet, if that were possible, and she winked fast, passing a hand across her eyes in a curious, uncertain gesture which was not like her. "A policeman, here! And why, may I ask?"

"Just—just a little matter of business, ma'am," replied the sheriff, very red and uneasy. "With—with Doctor Parker, here."

"Mf!" said Aunt Mary. "How amusing!" But I fancied that her manner was less glacial. "And this other gentleman?"

"Doctor Burgess, of Smyrna," explained Dorothy miserably.

"Ah, yes; Doctor Burgess, of course. And to what do we owe this unexpected—pleasure?"

It is impossible to describe the saccharine insolence of Aunt Mary's tone. Her smile was as saintly as ever, her courtesy impeccable, while her face wore its accustomed look of patient suffering. And yet with a look, with a drawled word, with a tiny pause before "pleasure," she contrived to make us all feel exquisitely uncomfortable. She had a genius for that sort of thing, I was beginning to perceive.

"I was afraid we'd intrude on you-all," began Redden, apologetically. "I reckon we better——" He stopped, not knowing what to say. Doctor Burgess looked down his nose, tugging reflectively at his heavy beard. Dorothy wiped her eyes.

"Doctor Gaskell is dead," I declared. The old lady's calm selfishness, her subtle discourtesy, angered me. Let her face the brutal fact, like the rest of us!

"Gaskell has been killed, right in your back yard!"

"Indeed!" Aunt Mary yawned. "Dorothy, where is my coffee? I feel very ill, after the shock of that man's brutal language yesterday. I need my coffee. But, then, no one thinks of me. No one cares enough for my suffering even to ask how I am. I dozed off toward morning; the birds didn't disturb me, thanks to Doctor Parker"—she nodded graciously toward Lewis—"and I got up quite rested. And then I'm expected to meet strangers at breakfast—which always upsets me—and on top of that I have to listen to such unpleasant news. Dear me! I feel the knots coming in my neck already. No one has any consideration for me!"

"Why, you——" I began and stopped. I had been about to flare out at the old lady; her callousness enraged me so. Surely this was beyond even Aunt Mary's self-absorption! But her white-lipped, quivering face checked me. This time, at least, Miss McGregor was really suffering; I was sure of that.

Then my eyes traveled past her to the nurse, Miss Christie, who had stood silently behind the wheel chair all this time. Then I jumped up.

"Lewis, Doctor Burgess! Quick, she's fainting!"

We all ran toward her, and just in time. With a faint sigh, Miss Christie collapsed limply, and the doctor caught her, as she fell, and laid her gently down.

Again I was struck by the unexpected beauty of her white face. Ordinarily sleepy and stolid, strong emotion seemed to vivify her face, to transfigure her bovine placidity. Now, lying with closed eyes, still and white as death, she was very beautiful.

"Upon my word!" cried Aunt Mary. "Every one seems to be in a conspiracy to upset me to-day. Dorothy, please take me to my room. I can't eat a mouthful."

This was scarcely true. The old lady had occupied her few minutes with us quite profitably, eating as she talked. She had consumed three waffles—I counted them—and two cups of coffee. But Dorothy wheeled her out obediently, while we men ministered to the fainting nurse.

Dorothy returned in a moment, to kneel beside me. "What do you suppose was the matter? Is she sick, Doctor Burgess? Poor girl! Let me, Uncle George."

She took the nurse's head upon her knee and began to bathe the broad, white forehead with cold water, very gently. Presently Miss Christie opened tragic, violet eyes that seemed black with emotion.

"What—what happened to Doctor Gaskell?" she asked in a whisper. "Who killed him?"

We stared at each other dumbly. It was Lewis who answered at last.

"I'm afraid I did it," he told her quite simply. "It was an accident. I didn't see a soul or hear a sound. I was coming down the path, and I thought I saw a quail." Here he repeated his story, almost word

for word, as he had told it a dozen times this morning. He was still much shaken.

"Oh!" It was the faintest of sighs, and I fancied that it expressed relief. A tinge of color crept into the girl's white cheeks as she covered her eyes and burst into tears.

"There, there, honey," said Dorothy. "What is it? What's the trouble?"

Miss Christie sat up and wiped her eyes. "N-nothing," she said sobbingly. "Only it was a shock. You see, Doctor Gaskell did so much for me; he was a wonderful friend. I was raised in the mountains, and I never had a chance until he came. But he helped me to leave home; he got me a place in the hospital. He kept me nursing for him ever since I graduated. Whatever I am, I owe to him. He was a father to me—a father!" She laughed bitterly. "A thousand times more kind than the only father I ever knew! That's all."

She rose quietly. Suddenly all the life and fire of her face died like a blown-out candle. She had been inspired; now she was commonplace once more, bovine, placid, almost stupid, expressionless. I wondered at the change. No one would look twice at her now.

"I must go and see to Miss McGregor," she murmured. "I'm sorry to have made so much trouble." Then she vanished silently.

CHAPTER VIII

THE INQUEST

SHERIFF REDDEN scratched his head. "Funny how upset she seemed," he remarked in his high, whining drawl. "I wonder, now, where I've seen that girl before? Christie, her name is? Christie? H'm! Likely, it's somebody else she favors. Say, they's a lot o' queer things about this here shootin', seems like."

I agreed with him thoroughly, and one of them was the curious conduct of Miss McGregor's nurse, both last night and just now.

"F'r instance," pursued the officer amicably, turned toward his prisoner, "Gaskell's bein' out yonder in th' bushes. Couldn't of been in th' path, or you'd of seen him." It seemed the sheriff accepted Lewis' story as true, and my heart warmed to him. "I wonder, now—— He must of been standin' right quiet, too, or ye'd of heard him. Don't seem natural, quite, he'd of let yuh git clost enough t' shoot 'ithout sayin' nothin'. Thet gun bar'l must of been right up agin' him, a'most."

"It seems as if I'd have seen him from the window, too, unless he was hiding," I put in. "Those bushes aren't high enough to hide his head."

Mr. Redden scratched his head again. "H'm! What you think, Parker?"

Lewis shook his head hopelessly. His black hair, usually sleeked straight back, had fallen over his

forehead. He tugged absently at a lock which hung down over his eyes. "I don't know—I can't seem to think at all."

The coroner looked up. He had resumed his seat and was finishing his fourth waffle. "Another possibility," he suggested, with his mouth full. "Might not have been hiding—he might have been dead already."

"H'm," said the sheriff, blinking at him.

My nephew brightened wonderfully. The color crept back into his sallow cheeks. "Do you really think so?"

Dorothy made a little cooing sound, and patted Lewis' hand. "I knew it would come out all right!" she declared, her big sea-blue eyes upon the coroner.

Under that admiring gaze, Doctor Burgess expanded. "Quite possible," he repeated. "Can't fix the time of death exactly—not within an hour or so. You realize that, Doctor Parker. If you saw nothing, heard nothing, not even a fall, it may have been because Gaskell had already fallen. Didn't you look to see if he was still bleeding or anything?"

Lewis flushed. "I—I was too upset," he confessed. "I heard the constable yelling, and I turned. I didn't see Gaskell until then, and it startled me so—that and knowing that Wakefield would surely think I did it, and remembering I'd quarreled with him yesterday, and seeing him, Gaskell, there, and all——" He stumbled and broke off. "Why, all I could see was that Gaskell was dead, and that I must have shot him."

"H'm! Well, we'll have a chance to straighten

all that out at the inquest." Sheriff Redden rose and bowed to Dorothy. "We sure are beholden to you, ma'am, f'r yore hospitality. But I reckon we better be shackin' along now. Gotta git back to th' jail. I—I reckon I'll have to take yo'r young man along, ma'am, jus' f'r to-day. Burgess'll be holdin' his inquest to-morrow; hey, doc? An' then we c'n turn th' boy loose f'r good. It—it's just a form, Miss Dorothy, ma'am."

Dorothy nodded. "You're awfully good, Mr. Redden—you're a perfect old dear!" And she kissed him impulsively. "You'll be real nice to Lewis, won't you?"

The old man beamed at her, his mahogany face three shades darker than normal. "I sure will, ma'am! Come along, Burgess. All right, Parker. It's just t' be my guest overnight, suh!"

And so they departed, leaving Dorothy, now that she need no longer be brave for her man's sake, to weep forlornly on my shoulder.

Then Peter McGregor appeared, carrying his own satchel. He was inclined to be rather aggrieved that no one had met him at the station; but none of us had so much as heard the New York train pull in.

Peter was told the whole story, and he listened gravely, sitting up very straight, as was his habit, and stroking his little black mustache. Peter was both slight and short, scarcely taller than his sister. But he carried himself so erectly, and his lean, intelligent face was so dignified that he seemed rather above than under the average size.

Now, when we had finished our dismal tale, he kissed Dorothy and patted my shoulder as grandly as though he had been a foot taller than I, instead of six inches shorter.

"I'll see the old boy through," he promised. "I'll take hold of things and get them straightened out in jig time!"

We were vastly relieved, for Peter was a capable, energetic chap, and he was not stunned by this dreadful affair as we were. He had not been here to receive its full, paralyzing shock.

He was off directly, without stopping to see Aunt Mary. "I can't stop to hear about the knots in her neck just now, Dot," he declared. "I've other more important things to do."

Before lunch he was back. "I've seen the old boy, Dot," he said. "He's pretty blue, but I hope I bucked him up a bit. And I've talked with the sheriff and Doctor Burgess. Inquest will be here at Pinelands, in the town hall, at ten to-morrow. The coroner's sure it'll come out all right; 'parties unknown,' maybe, or purely accidental at the worst. He was awfully decent; neither he nor the sheriff believes Lewis knew the fellow was there. Queer proceeding, I must say, for Gaskell to be pussy-footing around in our back yard like that! But it's all right; Lewis won't even need a lawyer, Burgess says. They'll see that he's cleared. So don't worry any more, Dot!"

Dorothy promised obediently; and I tried my best not to worry either. But that was a long, long day, and it was very hard to listen patiently to Aunt

Mary's complaints. For now that she knew that Lewis hadn't killed the quail, after all, their shrill note began to annoy her again. She quivered visibly, almost ostentatiously, at each repetition of "bob*white!* bob*white!*" until I had to bite my lips to keep from reminding her that her complaints about a few quail had caused tragedy enough already.

But the day passed somehow, and the night. Long before ten on Monday morning I sat on a front seat at the town hall, between Dorothy and her brother, waiting for the inquest to begin. Aunt Mary had protested pathetically against our "desertion," but for once her desires were ignored.

The room began to fill. At last the coroner arrived, then the sheriff, bringing Lewis with him. The boy came straight to us and sat down beside Dorothy, his guard dropping unobtrusively into a seat behind.

"Cheer up, honey!" whispered Lewis. "Hello, unk! Hello, Peter! Old Redden's a brick; treated me like a son. I slept in his spare bedroom. It'll all come right."

Then the coroner rapped for order, and the proceedings began.

I have not the heart, even now, to tell all that happened. Our high hopes were struck to the ground almost at once.

For the district attorney appeared, the "State Solicitor," as he is called in North Carolina, and he took charge of affairs. Coroner Burgess did his best for Lewis, and he proved himself a kindly and impartial presiding officer. He did more; he even

leaned toward us and argued in Lewis' favor. He was moved, perhaps, by the bond of their common profession; perhaps by a conviction that the boy was innocent; perhaps by Dorothy's appealing face, and the memory of that excellent breakfast. But, whatever the reason, he did his best for us.

Nevertheless, the solicitor, Toby Vanbrugh, combated all his well-meant efforts. Vanbrugh was a large-bodied young man, with a heavy, dignified face, whose features all seemed two sizes too big for it—except his eyes, which were three sizes too small and an inch too close together. He wore a flapping frock coat and a black string tie, the conventional get-up of the old-fashioned country lawyer. His voice and gestures made him seem like a cheap actor, playing the part of the fearless prosecutor in a melodrama.

He had been a close friend of Doctor Gaskell's, but I do not think it was that friendship which moved him. No, he saw here the makings of an important murder trial, in which both victim and murderer were people of prominence in the countryside. He saw an opportunity for self-advertisement. The McGregors were rich, he knew, and I was not without means. If Lewis could be indicted for the murder of Doctor Gaskell, there would be a long and hard-fought trial; prominent lawyers would appear for the defense; there would be columns and columns of publicity for the alert young prosecutor, who faced, alone and unaided, this galaxy of legal talent and fought it to a standstill, vindicating the rights of the commonwealth, demanding equal justice for

the rich as for the poor. Oh, he was not an uncommon type, this Vanbrugh; every community East and West, North and South, has known his like.

He allowed the coroner to present his case; the discovery of the body upon the heels of a gun shot, with Lewis standing over it, gun in hand. The coroner stated the cause of death and showed his jury a half dozen bird shot. These had been extracted from the wound, and he gave it as his opinion, as he had to us yesterday, that Gaskell might have been lying there dead before Lewis shot. Then the district attorney arose and asked permission to introduce other evidence "for the State."

He called Olsen, the druggist, to testify, reluctantly enough, to Lewis' threats in his store. He called Satterfield and the constable and two or three others who had overheard my nephew's angry talk. With diabolic skill he made it appear that Lewis had not merely spoken against Gaskell, but that he had definitely threatened to shoot him. He demanded the gun Lewis had carried; when it was placed in evidence, he cut open the undischarged cartridge—it was a double-barreled shotgun—and showed the jury that the shot were identical with the shot extracted from Gaskell's body.

I had already testified, but he recalled me and made an impassioned address to the jury, under the cover of a cross-examination.

"Now, Mr. Uhlman, is it not true that your nephew, after disagreeing with Doctor Gaskell in a question of diagnosis, lost his temper entirely? Did he not make a disgraceful exhibition of himself,

abusing this poor dead man, this Doctor Gaskell, a gentleman of the highest professional attainments, of the most scrupulous personal honor, a gentleman known to all in this community, loved by all for his unselfish devotion to his healing work, for the many, many, unobtrusive acts of charity, of loving kindness, to which scores in this very room, aye, hundreds in this town, can testify—and would so testify, though they must walk barefooted over sharp stones to tell of Doctor Gaskell's noble nature, and to confound his cowardly slayer——"

The coroner rapped sharply. "I will ask you to remember, Mr. Vanbrugh, that you're supposed to be questioning this witness, not to be making a stump speech!"

"I beg the court's pardon if my affection for this poor gentleman, so foully done to death, overcame me for the moment. Surely no praise of one, whom we all loved, is out of place here, beside his dead body! But I will refrain." He wiped his eyes ostentatiously. "Now, Mr. Uhlman, is it not true that your nephew, the prisoner, made threats against Doctor Gaskell at Miss McGregor's house, even before his outbreak at Olsen's store Saturday?"

And I had to admit it, cursing Rosina's loose tongue to myself; for I could guess whence Vanbrugh's knowledge of the quarrel over Aunt Mary's health had come.

"And do you believe, sir, remembering that you are upon your oath, do you ask this jury to believe that your nephew, this prisoner, went out into the dawn, armed with a deadly weapon, without knowl-

edge or suspicion of the murdered man's whereabouts? Do you not know that he had expressed a deadly animosity against my poor, dead friend, that——"

Playing skillfully upon the sectional prejudices of the audience, for my nephew and I had come down from the North, Vanbrugh rolled out a fervid eulogium of the dead man, like Marc Antony beside the bier of Cæsar. Evidently he was enjoying himself thoroughly.

He kept sneering at Lewis, and he continually referred to him as my nephew, doing his best to make it appear that I was suppressing a guilty knowledge because of our relationship. In every way he exercised the arts of an unscrupulous demagogue until I became confused and incoherent and stuttered with wrath, thereby making the case against Lewis blacker than ever.

But I will not repeat all he said. Even now the memory turns me furious. I will only say that when the coroner at last cut him off and turned the case over to the jury the verdict was a foregone conclusion.

Lewis leaned over to me. From the moment he left the stand he had beeen deathly white; there were dark, bruised rings under his eyes; his features twitched, his hands shook pitiably. "And the worst of it is, unk," he whispered tragically, "that I really did shoot the poor chap! Oh, I'm sure of it now." He tugged at his disordered black hair. "And, unk, that fiend Vanbrugh has almost made me think I did it on purpose!"

CHAPTER IX

A CONFLAGRATION

THE jury's deliberations were cruelly short. They conferred in whispers, while we waited in agony. Beside me, Dorothy gripped my hand so tightly that my old, rheumatic fingers ached for an hour after, though at the time I was scarcely conscious of her touch. Beyond her Lewis sat in frozen hopelessness, still numbed by the shock of this sudden, dreadful catastrophe which had overwhelmed us. At my other side, staunch little Peter sat bold upright, chewing his mustache and muttering to himself.

Then the jurymen all nodded, and the foreman rose and turned toward Doctor Burgess. The coroner sighed, stroking his beard. His fat, kindly face looked worried.

"Have you made up your minds, gentlemen?"

"Uh-huh," said the foreman. "We find that Doc Gaskell come t' his death f'om a shotgun full o' bird shot at th' hands o' Doc Parker, yonder; an' we riccomend holdin' him f'r th' superior court!"

Doctor Burgess sighed and cast an ugly look at the district attorney. "Your doings, Vanbrugh!" he said in an undertone. Then aloud: "I'll have to hold you for the action of the July grand jury, Parker. I'm sorry. Court's dismissed."

Behind us, the sheriff rose and tapped Lewis on

the shoulder. "Come on, boy; gotta take ye back. I sure am sorry, ma'am"—he looked at Dorothy—"but it ain't f'r long. You don't need to pay no attention t' Vanbrugh's foolishness."

"Oh," exclaimed Dorothy, "and day after tomorrow is my wedding day!"

Sheriff Redden shuffled his feet awkwardly, flinching at the sound of her quiet weeping. "Aw, too bad!" he said.

With Lewis at his elbow, he began pushing through the crowded, noisy room. It was full of gabbling, excited groups, which gave way reluctantly, and we received many an ugly look.

"A dirty murderer!" muttered some one. A storm of hisses and groans arose, as the crowd began to push closer, still inflamed by Vanbrugh's insinuations.

"Shut up, boys!" said the sheriff amiably. "Git back! Cain't yuh see th' lady's tryin' to git out?"

It was enough. With instinctive courtesy the throng separated, leaving a wide lane. Dorothy passed through it unhindered, with Lewis at one side and me at the other. Her face was very white, and her eyes were downcast. Her pathetic beauty changed the crowd's humor completely and evoked a little, pitying murmur.

So we went out and parted almost without a word. Like a man in a dream, Lewis climbed into the sheriff's battered car and rode away to jail, without once looking back. Dorothy leaned heavily on my shoulder, straining her eyes after him until he was out of sight. Then she stepped forward falteringly.

"T-take me home, Peter—Uncle George. No, I won't faint! I *won't!* I can w-walk all by my own self!"

And so she did, upheld by a pathetic pride, until we were back at Fort House. Then she collapsed, and Peter and I carried her to her own room and called for the nurse. Then we two men walked downstairs together and turned into the living room, to stand there aimlessly.

"Well," I asked at last, "what next?"

Peter jerked back his head, straightening his slim shoulders with a characteristic movement. "Whew! That was a cropper! I never dreamed they'd hold him. I say, that chap Vanbrugh is a bounder, isn't he?"

He stroked his little mustache, lit a cigarette, and was himself again—energetic, active, efficient. "We'll run right out to the jail," he decided, "and chat with old Lewis. Have to lay our plans, you know—get a good lawyer and all that. I say, that was a cropper! But a lawyer'll know what to do—get the old boy out in jig time!"

I was less optimistic; though, when one viewed the matter dispassionately, there seemed scant grounds for a charge of murder. Yet this Vanbrugh was fiendishly apt. Directly we got out Lewis' flivver, which Peter drove well enough, and went to the courthouse. We found Lewis in the jail office, sitting in an easy-chair beside the cold fireplace, while the sheriff, from behind the official desk, strove to cheer him up. Both men were in their shirt sleeves, for it had turned very hot.

"Evening, folks!" said Redden. "Set down an' rest yore face an' hands. I ain't goin' t' lock Parker up ontil night. He'll have t' go into a cell then, but they's no use of bein' too hard on th' boy. You-all can talk right here, gentlemen; I got business over to th' office, anyways."

Catching up his wide felt hat he shambled out, leaving us alone. "I better lock th' front door," he apologized, "just in case anybody sh'd drop by."

He disappeared, and I saw him through the window, waddling bow-legged toward the courthouse. A very kindly, courteous gentleman, the high sheriff of Carabas County; I only wished the prosecuting attorney were as gracious.

I turned back to Lewis. "My boy, we seem to be in a fix," I told him. "Confound Mary McGregor, the knots in her neck, and the bobwhites that kept her awake!" For my heart was hot in me with mingled fear and anger, and my head ached, and my old, rheumatic joints; and I could not forget that this whole horror had come from Aunt Mary's querulousness.

"Sit down and take it quiet, unk," said Peter coolly. I had not been long in Pinelands, as I have said; but to Peter I was "Uncle George," or, more casually, "unk," as to Dorothy and, for that matter, to half the youth of the town.

"Be easy! The old girl's a bit of a bunker to all of us, I know, but we'll have Lewis out of this all right. And now, old son, we'll have to be getting you a lawyer right away. Anybody to suggest? Some friend of your long-past youth, perhaps, and

all that rot?" His assumption of bluff, care-free gayety was well done, but it did not deceive me. I knew that Peter, too, was worried.

My nephew sighed, staring straight before him. His shoulders drooped; his eyes were dull and heavy. He seemed in a daze; I could scarcely recognize in him the impetuous, high-spirited youth who had been as a son to me all these years.

"I—I don't know," he answered dully. "I can't seem to think. All I can see is Gaskell in front of me—dead. I keep telling myself I couldn't have done it, and yet I know I did." Then he lapsed into silence once more, still with that vague, spiritless stare.

Peter and I looked at each other queerly. "I don't believe you did do it, old top!" Lewis straightened at once, a hint of hope in his eye. Peter had hit unerringly upon the best of tonics; I saw that.

"I'm sure you didn't, Lewis," the boy went on, emboldened by my nephew's interest. "It isn't reasonable. Suppose we sent for some doctor that's a law sharp, too? Burgess is all right, of course, but maybe some medico-legal expert could find out something to prove Gaskell was dead when you got there."

Lewis sprang up, a faint color in his cheeks. "Why, of course! What a fool I was not to think of it before. There's Somers, old Floyd Somers! Why, he'll be here to-night. Just the man, Somers is. Why, he'll take hold of this thing and straighten it out in a day; he just eats this sort of thing. He'll

prove I couldn't have killed Gaskell—unless"—and his shoulders drooped again—"unless I really did."

That was the boy's only show of interest. Almost at once he sunk again into apathy, brooding, I could see, upon the thought that he had killed a man, however innocently. That was what weighed upon him, not any fears for the future. He waved away all our suggestions. Lawyers? No, what difference did it make? Get any lawyer—anybody! Better still, let Somers see to that. He'd know what to do when he came. Then he lapsed into silence again, chin on hands, only to burst forth:

"And I was really angry—that's the worst of it. For a moment, there in Olsen's, I was mad enough to have shot him. And then to think I did shoot him, after that! Why, it makes it as bad as murder, even though I didn't know he was there. Perhaps I ought to plead guilty and take my medicine."

We cried out upon him. "Don't be a fool, Lewis," I said, fairly shaking him in my anxiety. "Wake up! Pull yourself together; act like a man! You're not yourself. What shall we do, Peter?"

Peter shook his head. "Wait for Somers, as he says. That's all I can see." He paused, sniffing. "I say, unk, what's that? Seems to me I smell smoke."

So did I. Suddenly I noticed that a thin, blue wreath was creeping in beneath the door, which Sheriff Redden had closed upon us. My eyes smarted. The door was locked; I ran to a window to yell at a couple of loafers on the courthouse steps.

"Hey! You over there! Call the sheriff!"

They stirred, stared at the jail idly for a moment, then leaped to their feet.

"My gosh!" said one. "Th' jail's afire. Hey, Hank! Hey, Redden! Redden! Come a-runnin', th' jail's on fire!"

The sheriff appeared, at his heels half a dozen clerks and county officials in shirt sleeves. They all ran toward us, bawling aloud:

"Fire! Fire! Fi-re! Send in an alarm t' Smyrna —no, to Pinelands! Better call 'em both! Hustle up, sheriff, turn them pris'ners loose!"

They pelted up the steps; a key sounded in the door, and presently Lewis, Peter, and I were outside, taking great breaths of the fresh air. The clerk of the superior court stood at my elbow, a fat, red-faced man in a shiny black alpaca coat. He wiped his moist face.

"Carabas County's goin' to build another new jail, I reckon," he drawled resignedly.

The building itself was of brick, but floors, doors, and interior trim were all pine, and they burned merrily. All the prisoners must be loosed; Sheriff Redden and his deputy herded them out and rounded them up in two groups, white and colored, while county officials organized a volunteer guard.

As I have said, the county buildings were equidistant from Smyrna and Pinelands; before the fire department of either town could answer the alarm the fire had a fine start. Then both engines arrived at once, and the sheriff was put to it to prevent a fight between the rival fire companies for prior rights to a hydrant. At last the blaze was subdued,

and by sundown the two engines pumped water upon an empty brick shell, whose furniture and woodwork were destroyed. Some of the cells, of steel and concrete, were undamaged; but even these were too hot for occupancy.

Sheriff Redden stopped beside me to stroke his absurd wisp of mustache. "Quite a clearance," he observed mildly. "Started over on th' colored side; George Willett's colored boy, Jim, he done set fire t' another boy's mattress 'f'r a joke,' he claims. I aim t' make that fellow realize it wa'n't no joke. Uh-huh! But we cain't keep nobody out here to-night, nohow. Lucky I ain't got more'n nine pris'ners, an' most o' them c'n go right to Smyrna to th' lockup there. An' Doc Parker here," turning to Lewis, "w'y, doc, I reckon I better send you back t' Pinelands. They got a reel comf'table lockup there, an' Rufe Wakefield, he'll look after you good. Ain't got no backbone, Rufe ain't, but he's got a reel good heart, an' his ol' woman cooks splendid. Yessuh! Be kinda better f'r yuh, anyways, mebbe, right clost to yore folks that a way."

Thus it was arranged, and presently Peter and Lewis and I, with a taciturn, tobacco-chewing deputy sheriff, squeezed into the flivver and drove back to Pinelands.

We routed out Wakefield, the constable, and he took us all to the village lockup, a small brick building, rather like a magnified shoebox, directly behind the business section of Pinelands. Its interior proved rather better than I had feared; though hardly palatial, it was comfortable enough.

"Reel nice room!" Wakefield pointed it out with pardonable pride. "Spring bed and ever'thing. Colored side's beyond that brick wall there. Mister Uhlman c'n fetch ye sheets, 'f he wants t', or anything else. An' th' woman'll cook ye up some supper directly."

We left, promising to return shortly with sheets, a feather pillow and a clean mattress, an armchair, and what comforts we could manage. Lewis dropped on the edge of the bunk, chin in hands, and let us go without a word.

CHAPTER X

MORE TROUBLE THREATENS

AS we climbed back into the flivver, I suddenly became conscious of an aching internal void. I had had nothing to eat since morning; in the shock of that unimagined verdict I had quite forgotten my lunch.

"Let's go and eat, Peter," I suggested.

"Right-o!"

Just as we climbed into the flivver the shrill whistle of an approaching train sounded. Peter swore.

"The Limited!" he said. "This is Monday night, and poor old Lewis' best man will be on that train. We'll have to stop for him, unk. I only hope he's as good as the old boy thinks; maybe we'll get a little action."

"I hope so, indeed. But, Peter, he can't have had much experience. He was Lewis' classmate, you know. I'm afraid the boy overvalues him. We can't look for too much from him."

"Well, we'll see soon enough." Peter stopped the car beside the tracks, just as the long string of Pullmans clanked and squealed to a halt. Only one vestibule was opened, for this was the through train for Florida, and in summer it rarely left a passenger at Pinelands.

A single passenger alighted; a tall, lanky young man, whose hat was pulled down over his eyes. His

arms and legs seemed extraordinarily long and thin. The porter dropped a couple of bags beside him, caught up his step, and climbed back; the long train wheezed and roared away.

The stranger stood still, looking irritably about the deserted platform. In winter the Pinelands station is lively enough, with gay-clad, chattering folk, with expensive motor cars parked the full length of its platforms; while passengers by the dozen, bearing golf bags and gun cases and tennis rackets, climb on and off every train. Ours is a tourist town, and it begins to be one of the best-known of the Eastern winter resorts. But in summer it is quiet enough.

The stranger scowled, I say, and glanced about him with an expression of acute dissatisfaction upon his dark, saturnine features. "Friendly looking beggar, what?" whispered Peter to me. Then he saw us and beckoned imperiously.

"Where's Parker?" he demanded. "Doctor Parker?"

"He's detained," said I, advancing with outstretched hand. "I'm his uncle, George Uhlman. This is Doctor Somers?"

"How do?" he asked indifferently. "Pity Parker couldn't take the trouble to come himself! Rotten town, this. Those are my bags."

He stalked to the car and clambered in, his remarkably long, thin arms and legs giving him somewhat the appearance of that insect we used to call daddy longlegs. Peter winked at me, then picked up the bags, which our cavalier guest had indicated, and lugged them meekly to the car.

"Where to, sir?" Peter asked, burlesquing a chauffeur's salute.

Doctor Somers grinned; his dark, sardonic face changed wonderfully, and for an instant became cheerful, friendly. "Don't be an ass," he requested equably. "You're Peter McGregor, I take it. Lewis has written me about you, his best girl's brother. He said you were a little runt."

Peter snorted. "He never told me you were such a long, silly clothes prop," he retorted. "Why, man, those legs haven't any more meat on 'em than bean poles!" Peter's size is a sore topic with him.

The stranger grinned again, quite undisturbed. "Climb in, climb in," he urged. "I'm hungry. Where is old Parker, anyhow? Ministering to the needs of his extensive and growing practice, no doubt."

I had found the man's brusque, indifferent impudence rather engaging, but this question sobered me suddenly. "My nephew is in trouble," I replied. "No"—Doctor Somers' lips opened—"don't make any fool joke about it. It's a serious matter. He's in jail, charged with murder."

But, if I had looked for excitement or interest, I was disappointed. Doctor Somers made no comment, showed no interest whatever. "Well, drive on," he said. "I'm hungry."

We drove home in silence to an agitated household. Luckily Dorothy had not yet heard of the fire at the jail; she had been spared that further alarm. Over the supper table we told her, and she listened, wide-eyed and tremulous.

Aunt Mary did not come to the table. She had

been much subdued all day, it appeared, and had kept to her room and scarcely opened her mouth, even to discuss her sufferings. So the nurse, Miss Christie, could eat undisturbed to-night. As usual, she had nothing to say. With her round, sleepy face bent over her plate, she ate hurriedly and pushed back her chair before we others were through, murmuring an apology. She must go and fix Miss McGregor's tray.

Our guest, Doctor Somers, was taciturn also. Poor, distraught Dorothy had given him a word of greeting and then forgotten him. She was too upset to play the hostess. But he did not seem in the least embarrassed. He ate sparingly, his sallow face wearing that same expression of distaste for everything about him. His gray-green eyes, curiously light beneath black brows, were fixed keenly upon Miss Christie's sleepy face. He did not seem at all interested in what Peter and I were saying to his hostess.

When the nurse had gone out he turned to me. "I take it that my friend Parker has got himself into trouble." His face was sober enough, but, behind it, the hint of a sarcastic grin seemed to lurk. "Suppose you tell me just how it happened, now. All I gather from your discourse to date is that he's in jail, charged with murder by a coroner's jury—or, rather, that he was in jail until it burned down."

Dorothy turned upon him, a heartbreaking hope shining from her eyes. "Oh, Doctor Somers, we're so upset! You must forgive us. But Lewis told me you'd straighten it out for him. Why——"

Somers' thin lips parted in an acid grin, but he said nothing. We all began to talk at once, pouring out breathlessly the whole dreadful story, and he listened abstractedly, or, at least, we supposed he was listening.

"And so the jury recommended that he be held," I finished. "There were no grounds at all—it was pure accident. If it hadn't been for that miserable lawyer Vanbrugh——"

Somers yawned and nodded his head. "I've got it!" he announced. "Of course I'll make an examination in the morning, but I'm sure of it now."

We all gaped at him, open-mouthed. "That girl, the nurse," he went on placidly, "deficient thyroid! That's what ails her. No wonder she looks sleepy!"

"Gr-r-r-r!" said Peter indignantly, and pushed back his chair. "I'm going for the mail." He stalked out.

Doctor Somers looked from Dorothy to me and back again, with that curious suggestion of a sardonic grin behind his sober face. Plainly enough our faces expressed disgusted hopelessness.

"I'm sorry," he said in apology, and there was something very likable in his frank, direct gaze. "I'm a queer sort, I suppose. I'm always getting off on the wrong foot like this. But, after you get to know me better, you'll find I'm not so bad after all. I heard all you said," he went on, to Dorothy's implacable face. "I'm used to thinking of two or three things at once; in my work one has to. Cheer up! That's better," he declared, as Dorothy, in spite of herself, softened before his friendliness.

"It's a pretty serious thing—to us!" she replied.

"My child," he answered very gravely—and he could not have been over thirty, I supposed, but suddenly he seemed older, wiser, more mature than I am at sixty—"I know it, but the only way to handle a matter like this is to go at it dispassionately. I'm fond of old Parker myself"—and the dark, sour face softened wonderfully for a second—"but I can't let myself get flustered and upset and run round in rings as you folks have. For example: You heard the shot, Uhlman. You ran out at once, got there within five minutes, and put your hand on the dead man's chest, didn't you?"

I nodded in amazement. The fellow had heard all we said, after all!

"You touched the body, then, within perhaps five minutes of the time Parker shot. Now, did it occur to you to notice whether it was still warm—or cold?"

I stared dumbly, searching a confused memory. "Why—why, I never thought of that. I was too upset. But now I remember. Why, of course, I noticed it at once; his flesh was as cold as a stone! That's why I was sure he was dead." Then an illuminating thought struck me; I jumped up, shouting. "Hurrah! He didn't do it, Dorothy, he didn't do it by accident or any way! He couldn't have, of course! I must run right down there and tell him; that's what has been troubling him all along—the thought that he'd killed a man!"

"Sit down," suggested Somers equably. "Take it easy. There's been altogether too much of this

running round and talking, and too little plain thinking."

I accepted the rebuke. "You're right. Why, if I'd only thought of this before, there wouldn't have been any trouble at the inquest. I'm an old fool!"

"No bigger fool than your nephew or the constable," he replied. "If any one of the three of you had thought to observe that the body was cold, or had stopped bleeding, you'd have known the man hadn't been killed before your eyes. Of course, by the time the coroner got there, it was too late to fix the time of death exactly."

Dorothy sighed ecstatically, her face rosy with new-born confidence in this brusque, saturnine stranger. "What shall we do next?"

"Humph! Wedding was set for Wednesday, wasn't it? How many invitations did you send out?"

She looked at him blankly. "Why, about a hundred and fifty; we didn't ask everybody. Oh, dear, we can't have it now, can we?"

"Hardly. Have you sent out notices of postponement?"

"We never thought of that!"

Doctor Somers yawned. "I think you needed me," he said.

Just then the front door opened, and Peter burst in, white-faced and trembling.

"Come, Uncle George!" he exclaimed. And then, with a glance of supreme disfavor at Doctor Somers, "And you, too! Lewis claims you're a wonder. I doubt it like blazes, but, if you are, now's the time to show it. Come on, get up, man! Hurry!"

We stared at him. Dorothy, paper-white, one hand at her breast, asked the question that trembled also on my lips.

"Oh, what's happened? What's happened now?"

Peter hesitated. His eye caught Somers, leaning back in an armchair, calmly lighting a cigarette. He could contain himself no longer.

"They're going to lynch Parker to-night!" He blurted his news defiantly, as if it had been a bomb to shatter our guest's indifference. "I just heard it downtown. A lot of 'em are drinking; they've taken the keys away from Wakefield already; they're going down to the lockup and get poor old Parker and hang him!"

CHAPTER XI

PREPARATIONS FOR DEFENSE

DOCTOR SOMERS arose slowly, his long, thin arms and legs looking more frail, more tenuous, than usual. One feared that they would snap, like pipe stems, under the slightest strain. He did not look in the least like the man to brave the fury of a mob; but his dark, saturnine face was quite unmoved.

"Bright lad!" he exclaimed, sarcastically. "Go ahead; frighten the girl to death, why don't you?" He patted Dorothy's arm with unexpected gentleness. "Now don't you worry, child; we'll look after your young man for you. Nobody's going to be lynched to-night!"

He beckoned us out, and in the hall he asked Peter if he had a shotgun.

The boy nodded. "I'll get it," he said, and ran up the stairs.

Presently he was back, panting, with a repeating shotgun and an automatic pistol. "Lucky I had two guns," said he, stuffing a box of shells into his pocket. "The coroner took the other one. And here, Somers, here's an army pistol and some cartridges." Peter had been a second lieutenant.

Somers waved it aside. "Don't want it. Give it to Uhlman, here. I don't think we'll need firearms, but it's well to be prepared. Now let's go!"

My nephew's car still stood in front of the house; we piled in and drove toward Main Street.

"I take it your constable won't be much help," said Somers, "if they've taken his keys so easily."

Peter snorted. "A big yellow pup!"

"Right! We won't bother him. Stop at this grocery. Who keeps it, by the way?"

"Old Mrs. Tracy. But it's closed."

"So much the better. Kept by an old woman, you say; any man or boy in it?"

"No," answered Peter, wondering. "She's all alone, and deaf and half blind into the bargain. People only trade there for charity."

"Fine!" declared Doctor Somers surprisingly. "Couldn't be better!" He twisted his long legs out of the car. "As we came through from the train I noticed a lot of eggplant in the window."

"Now, what the deuce——"

But Somers did not stop for questions. Already he had skirted the tiny shop and was knocking at its back door. When no answer came, he opened it and walked in. We heard the confused noise of his shouting at poor old Mrs. Tracy; presently he came back to the car with a grape basket under one arm.

"What kind of foolishness is this?" demanded Peter, craning his neck. The basket was full of round, purplish eggplant, a little bigger than a baseball. "Man, can't you understand that Lewis Parker is in danger of his life?"

"I can," replied Somers, unruffled. "Better than you do, perhaps. I've seen two lynching mobs before. Now don't ask fool questions, but come along."

He obeyed, blindly obedient. The man's preparations seemed sufficiently absurd, but he seemed, at least, to know what he was doing, and neither of us had an idea of the proper steps to take.

"Now a book shop," ordered our leader. "Stationery store—something like that. I want some writing paper."

Without protest Peter drove across the way to Jack Wheat's. Somers entered; through the window we watched him selecting stationery as calmly as if the whole night were before him. At last he came out, a package under his arm that might have held two hundred sheets of note paper with envelopes to match.

"They'll have to do," he remarked disparagingly. "Don't be in such a hurry!" He glanced at his wrist watch, as Peter mumbled some protest. "They won't start anything before the town's safely gone to bed. Not until midnight, anyhow, I fancy. McGregor, you drive us round to the lockup and leave us there. Then take the car and hunt up a phone, where you won't be interrupted. Try to find the sheriff—he's a good sort of officer, I judge from what you've said —and tell him there's going to be trouble to-night. Then come back to the jail."

Peter protested unavailingly. The mob might come before he got back; Uncle George could go; Somers could go. He, Peter, ought to be here to protect Lewis.

"Shut up and get out! Uhlman can't go; he can't drive—can you? And I can't go; I'm a stranger. But you can find a phone, and the sheriff'll listen to

you. Besides, I can do more here than you could. Hurry now; you'll be back in plenty of time for the excitement."

Reluctantly Peter went, after leaving Doctor Somers and me in front of the lockup. The doctor looked about approvingly. The lockup stood a little apart from the buildings about it, a tobacco warehouse on one side and an empty dwelling house on the other. He walked completely around the ugly brick jail, tried its barred windows with satisfaction.

"Fine," he announced. "Clear space all around, if it came to a siege. And the windows are small and well barred; nobody can get in except through the door. Which is Parker's window?"

I told him, and he went there and whistled. "Hello, Parker! It's Somers. How's the old doc, anyway? Good! Be in to see you to-morrow; can't get hold of the keys just now."

He came around to the front again and looked up at the arc light in the street. "Fine!" he repeated. "There's an excellent light—good enough to read by."

Whereon he sat himself down upon the wide jail steps, placed his basket of eggplant in the shadow beside him, and unwrapped that package of note paper. "Make yourself comfortable, Uhlman," said he. "I'm going to be busy for a while."

He produced a fountain pen and fell to writing, while I watched him in amazement. What on earth was he doing? Writing notices to post on the jail door, to warn off the mob? I could not imagine.

But there he sat, writing busily in a fine, copper-

plate script, hunched on the step, with his extraordinary legs coiled under him, his dark, sallow face calmly intent. The light from the street lamp cast the shadow of his thin, hooked nose downward over his chin and gave him the look of a fierce, long-legged bird.

At last Peter drove up. "Couldn't get him," he said, guardedly, his voice bitter with disappointment. "Gone over to the other end of the county after some negro. And the jail deputy's got his hands full looking after the prisoners. He'll send somebody over later, if he can. By then it'll be too late!"

Somers looked up, quite undisturbed. "We don't need anybody," he answered indifferently. "Go park that flivver out of sight and come back on foot."

When that was done, he stationed Peter with his pistol at one corner of the building, and me at the other, with the shotgun. I had asked for this weapon as being less likely to damage me, and more likely, in my hands, at least, of doing execution among the enemy than an automatic pistol, whose workings were strange to me. Then he returned to the steps, took up his fountain pen and fell to writing again.

And so began a vigil which seemed endless. Though the day had been hot, the night was cool, as our Southern nights usually are. A little breeze played about the corners of the jail, sending sharp twinges through my poor old joints; I shivered with cold and nervousness. I could hear Peter's feet shuffling in the sand, and I knew that he, too, was restless. But between us Doctor Somers sat on the

steps, hunched over his writing, and he did not even look up. His pen traveled rapidly, held in a hand as steady as a rock; he wrote note after note, all just alike apparently, and, as he finished each one, folded it methodically and tucked it into a blank envelope. His calm, untroubled face was bent studiously over his work, and he never shifted his position; we heard no sound from him save the steady scratching of his pen, the rustling of paper, as he folded one note and took up another sheet. For some reason, it was an eerie sight. I began to have more respect for Doctor Floyd Somers. He was brave, at any rate.

CHAPTER XII

A FRUSTRATED LYNCHING

THE night seemed interminable. The faint evening sounds from Main Street, a block away, faded gradually and ceased. One after another buggies and farm wagons creaked away; motor cars roared suddenly into life and departed in a diminuendo of explosions, or hummed off into the night; we heard an occasional outburst of laughter, evoked by the repartee bawled across a block, and at last all was still.

I looked at my watch; almost midnight! Pinelands had gone to sleep—or had it? Soon, if at all, they would be coming. The faint breeze began to carry mysterious whispers; in it I fancied hushed commands, threats, the stealthy creeping of feet over the sand. My nerves tensed and tensed; the fluttering of moths about the arc lamp fretted me to distraction. A huge June bug blundered full tilt against its globe and ricocheted off; the sound seemed thunderous, so that I jumped, barely suppressing a cry.

And always Floyd Somers sat there on the step, long legs curled grotesquely under him, and wrote and wrote. I wanted to cry out at him, to grip him by the shoulder and shriek in his ear that a mob was coming; that murder crept, stealthy-footed, toward us through the still summer night. Any-

thing to rouse him to a human excitement; to wipe that impassive, studious absorption from his lean, sallow face.

Wearily I shifted my feet, wondering whether Lewis was asleep. His bunk was in the cage, three feet inside the window; he could not look out for the bars. I listened intently for his breathing. Did he suspect, I wondered? Did he lie there awake, helpless, waiting for the mob to drag him forth to a shameful death? And suddenly I remembered, with a queer twinge of shame, that we had forgotten to bring him bed linen. It was a foolish thought, of course, but I cannot tell you how it distressed me. Suppose that we failed—that the mob had its way after all. Should I ever be able to forgive myself that Lewis had been without clean sheets during his last night on earth?

Then I fell to worrying about Dorothy. Poor child! If this vigil was terrible to me, waiting, shotgun in hand, for an attack, what must it be to her? She waited there in that grim, ghost-haunted pile, beneath whose very windows a man had died horribly, only yesterday; with no company save that stupid nurse, asleep long ago, no doubt, and Aunt Mary McGregor, who could think of nothing but her own troubles. She could not know what was happening here; had no way of learning until we should come home. In her imagination, no doubt, Lewis was dying a hundred deaths, and she with him. For it is terrible, worse than death, I think, to wait helplessly while a loved one is in peril.

I groaned aloud. Would they never come? Sud-

denly I was impatient for the test; I would have welcomed a physical attack, anything to get it over and be at rest; anything but this dreadful tension of waiting! I strained my ears anew, but I heard only the faint scratching of Somers' tireless pen.

Suddenly it came. A distant oath, an abrupt outbreak of raucous, obscene song, as abruptly cut off, the sound of a blow! The confused tramp of many feet thudded in the muffling sand and approached inexorably, with a strange, broken rhythm.

Somers lifted his head alertly; the uncertain light fell across it, and his deep-set eyes and thin, hooked nose seemed oddly fierce.

"Quiet, now, you men!" he ordered. "Keep back; don't show yourselves unless I call."

He went on writing with a steady hand.

Craning my neck around the corner of the jail, I made out a clump of moving shadows. Some one stumbled and swore aloud, drunkenly. Then, with startling abruptness, the crowd debouched into the arc lamp's circle of light.

They moved with ominous deliberation in a sort of rude marching order, four abreast. Handkerchiefs, blue, red, and black, were tied across each face below the eyes, making the marchers unrecognizable. These were my own neighbors; unmasked, I could have recognized almost every face, no doubt. But seen thus they were fearsome shapes, uncanny, inhuman, and I shivered and quailed before them. One burly fellow in the first rank carried a coil of rope. Fascinated, I saw how it swung carelessly at his side, and I noted its fresh, yellow color. My

nephew was honored, I thought hysterically; they had bought a new rope for his hanging!

The straggling column advanced; its head wheeled straight toward the jail. Then the marchers caught sight of Doctor Somers' quiet figure, crouched there on the steps, still writing busily. They halted suddenly, confused, and suspicious of this strange guard. They scented a trap, as mobs will; surely this fellow would not be sitting there so calmly unless he knew that the jail was well protected!

There was some jostling, and the column broke its formation. Men pushed forward from the rear until they formed a rough semicircle at a respectful distance. The tall man who bore that sinister rope stepped forward a little.

And then, and not till then, Floyd Somers laid his writing precisely by and rose upon those slender, stiltlike legs, looking rather like a steel windmill tower, I reflected absurdly.

"Good evening, gentlemen." His voice was perfectly unruffled and casual. "A fine, cool night for a walk!"

A little, incredulous gasp ran through the silent crowd, followed by an ominous mutter. Was this fellow making game of them?

"Evenin'," replied the rope bearer gruffly. "What yuh doin' here?"

Somers yawned and smiled that sudden, disarming smile, that could so change his saturnine features. "Why, writing a letter to my best girl, as you can see." He gestured toward the heap of notes.

"Huh?" asked the crowd's spokesman. He seemed

bewildered, yet confident. "What's the feller doin' here?" I could fancy him thinking. "Somethin' funny! Well, we'll find out—got lots of time!"

"Huh?" Above his red bandanna his eyes glinted at the heap of envelopes. "Writin' a whole lot o' letters, seems t' me!"

"Why," replied Somers blithely, "that's because I've got a whole lot of best girls!"

The jest was feeble enough, but it caught the fancy of the crowd. A gust of laughter ran about the semicircle, and its tension relaxed visibly. The humor of the mob seemed less silently savage than before. "No wonder!" exclaimed some one. "Fine, fat feller like you oughta have plenty o' girls!"

"I *have*." Somers' burlesque of satisfied vanity was irresistibly comic. "Anything I can do for you, gentlemen? I've got six or eight more to write, you see."

"Sure is!" The spokesman stepped forward again, swinging his rope menacingly. This skinny stranger needn't think he could play horse with them, his gesture said grimly. "Run along, sonny, an' write yore letters some'rs else. We-all got bus'ness in that there jail, see?"

"So? Well, there's no hurry, is there? You've got all night before you. Suppose we talk about that a while?"

The other scratched a perplexed head, tilting his wide-brimmed hat forward. Plainly he did not know what to make of this imperturbable stranger. After an instant's hesitation he decided to humor him.

"We-ell, we got plenty time, sure enough!" he

declared. "Ain't nobody goin' t' stop us. We're after that skunk inside, stranger—that feller Lewis Parker, what murdered Doc Gaskell yestiddy mornin'."

The mob took a step forward, growling assent. The words seemed to have rekindled its fury.

"Murdered Doctor Gaskell?" asked Somers coolly. "How come?"

The crowd's spokesman snorted. "Nev' you mind how come! He done it, an' 'at's enough. Git outa th' way now, sonny, an' let us in!"

Somers held his place. "The door's locked."

Again the crowd laughed; this time raucously, hatefully.

"Oh," jeeringly exclaimed one, swaying on wide-set feet, "Rufe Wakefield ain't such a big fool as some fellers. He didn't make no trouble about th' key w'en we-all come after it—ner you won't make no trouble, neither, w'en we-all gits ready t' use it!"

A chorus of drunken agreement broke out. "'At's right, Charlie! Give it to 'im. C'm' on, fellers, smash 'im!" It was plain that many in the crowd had found means of circumventing the Eighteenth Amendment.

"Shut up! Who's runnin' this, huh?" It was the leader, jealous of his authority, and the noise subsided.

"Didn't mean nothing, R-rappy, ol' boy," replied the disturber.

"Shut up! Ain't yuh got no sense atall, slingin' names around that a way?" He faced Somers again. "We-all got th' key, all right," he continued, "an'

we aim t' use it, see? Right way now—d'rectly! Yuh better git outa th' way, afore th' fireworks begins!"

"One moment! Listen, you men," Somers' voice was really eloquent. "You're going to do a great injustice. Parker is innocent! He didn't shoot Doctor Gaskell—the man was dead before he got out there at all—dead and cold! Let the law take its course, boys. Parker's here in jail; he can't get away. He'll be tried, and, if he's guilty he'll be convicted and punished. You don't want to hang an innocent man, do you? I tell you Gaskell was dead and cold before Parker came out at all!"

An outburst of jeers and hisses cut him short. The crowd would not listen to any further interference with its proposed pleasures. But the tall spokesman commanded silence. He seemed shaken.

"Shut up! Shut up!" With paralyzing suddenness he produced a huge revolver, and the angry cries of the mob died away. "That's better! I ask you-all ag'in, who's runnin' this here lynchin'? Any more cracks, an' somebody's gointa git hurted bad. Now, stranger, what's that yuh say, Gaskell was daid afore Parker come out?"

"Dead and cold!" repeated Somers. "Mr. Uhlman touched his chest two minutes after Parker shot, and he was cold then."

"Who?"

"Mr. Uhlman—George Uhlman."

There was a chorus of jeers and howls. "Uhlman, ol' Uncle Gawge, huh? His own uncle! Likely he'd

claim Parker shot 'im! Why didn't he tell all this to th' inquest, huh? Big, fishy yarn—fake—fake!"

Despite their leader's gesture, the mob surged forward; they would no longer be balked of their quarry. Above the clamor, the man who had boasted of taking the jail keys from Rufe Wakefield, howled shrilly: "C'm' on, fellers! Let's git 'im out. Skinny's jus' tryin' t' hold us an' argue till ol' Redden gits here. C'm' on! Git 'im afore th' sheriff comes!"

Emitting wild yells to work its courage up, after the manner of mobs, the throng pressed on. It was touch and go; they were almost upon the defenseless Somers. Without awaiting Somers' call, Peter McGregor and I turned the jail corners almost together and ran forward to take up our stations on either side of the steps.

Somers scowled at us. "Why didn't you keep back?" he demanded. "I don't need you."

None the less, our sudden eruption checked the mob. They hung back from Peter's menacing pistol and eyed dubiously the shotgun, which I held at the ready.

"Say when, doc!" invited Peter grimly. He leveled his automatic at the mob's tall leader and slipped its safety catch.

"Keep quiet!" Somers was rather ungracious, I thought, seeing that we had infallibly saved him, all unarmed as he was, from a severe beating at least. But now, without more words, he stooped, extending an arm incredibly long and bony, and lifted his grape basket of eggplant from the dark corner where it had sat.

He laid it very carefully down on the step beside him, selected one of the dark-purple vegetables and held it up.

"Did any of you boys get overseas?" he inquired conversationally.

The wondering mob gaped inquiringly.

"Good boy! Oh, good boy!" declared Peter from his side of the steps, as he chuckled triumphantly.

I was less acute, but some of the men facing us must have understood Somers' meaning, for I noted that hats moved uneasily, as their wearers shrank back into the crowd.

"I gather that some of you got to France," went on Somers, quite unperturbed. "You see what I'm holding, don't you? Suppose you tell these other chaps what will happen, five seconds after I pull the pin?"

The crowd had frozen into a sudden, awed silence. "Keep back, you fool!" came an agonized whisper. "Quit shovin'! Want us all blowed to blazes?"

"Just got into your beautiful city this evening," remarked Doctor Somers affably. "Stopped off at Camp Sheridan on the way." This was the cantonment nearest to Pinelands. "I've a friend there in the ordnance department; he lent me these little tricks, just in case of—of anything like this. Now don't crowd, boys, please don't! I promised I'd bring 'em all back safely, and I'd just hate to spoil one."

"Aw, quit it!" came the same hoarse whisper. "Rush 'im, huh? Nix! If it was a machine gun, mebbe; but I don't aim t' go to glory in pieces.

No*ssir!* Huh? 'At's a hand grenade, feller—a Mills bomb! G'wan, start somethin', 'f you want, an' git all messed up. Me, I'm goin' home!"

And straightway one masked figure detached itself and marched briskly away, untieing his handkerchief and stuffing it into a pocket as he went. There was a general movement to follow. The tall leader dropped his coiled rope and pushed his hat far back. "What's th' use! I give up, stranger; you got us buffaloed. Ain't a-goin' to be no lynchin' to-night. But, if it hadn't of been f'r them bombs——"

In token of amity, he untied the red bandanna, which masked him, and bared the lean, stubbly face and piratical mustache of Ralph Satterfield. "Uncover, boys," he said. "Them masks is uncomf'table, an' we ain't a-goin' t' break no laws, so they ain't needed no more."

Most of the crowd followed his example, but some effaced themselves, evidently ashamed of being identified in such company and upon such an errand. Those who remained crowded forward, so that Peter and I raised our weapons, fearing an attack; but Satterfield waved them aside.

"Put by yore shootin' irons," he said to us, alcoholically generous. "We ain't a-goin' to start nothin'. I give my word, didn't I?"

I hesitated, but Somers frowned me into compliance. The mob leader advanced. "You got us beat, stranger. I'd like t' shake you by th' hand, sir. Ain't a-many has bested Ralph Satterfield this a way!"

Laying his vegetable bomb carefully aside, the doctor came down the steps quite fearlessly, one lean

arm extended; and presently his slender hand was engulfed in the bootlegger's huge grip.

"Good feller!" declared Satterfield. "Friend o' mine, yuh hear, boys? Have a drink, stranger?"

He fumbled at a hip pocket, hiccoughing. Evidently he had given his own goods the testimonial of personal use.

"I thank you, sir," replied Doctor Somers blandly. "Just a swallow to our friendship." He tilted the bottle expertly, but I noted that he did not drink. "And now, gentlemen, this lynching foolishness is all over, isn't it?"

"Yes, sir! Oh, yes, sir! Shore, stranger!" declared the crowd genially.

"Fine!" Somers took the bootlegger's hand again. "I'll depend on you, Mr.—Satterfield, isn't it? You'll guard my friend, Parker, and keep him safe for us, for his sweetheart and his uncle, won't you?"

I caught my breath at the colossal impudence of this proposal; that the mob, which had come to lynch Lewis, should protect him against the possible attack of others. But Somers had gauged the spirit of the crowd better than I; he was a profound psychologist.

Satterfield burst into a roar of laughter, which ended in a tremendous hiccough; he staggered about and pounded his thighs in an ecstasy of mirth. "By gum, man," he exclaimed, "you're a wonder—a wonder! Any man's got nerve like that, I'm for him. Yes, sir! 'S aw right, stranger, 's aw right. Here!"

In token of good faith he plunged a hairy hand into his pocket and brought forth a big key. "Here's

th' jail key, sir; you keep it. Give it back t' Rufe, 'f yuh wanta. Parker's safe; I give yuh my word, sir." And he shook hands all over again, growing mellower and mellower, as his last drink warmed him. "Ain't nobody a-goin' t' touch 'im now. You hear me, boys!" he said to the crowd at his back. "Nobody don't touch Doc Parker, or bother 'im, unless'n they hankers t' meet up 'ith me, Satterfield!"

He turned back again to Somers. "S-sass'fied?" he inquired gravely. "Me an' a coupla other fellers'll stay an' keep watch if yuh say so."

Somers laughed at that, and clapped the other's back. "You're a fine chap, Mr. Satterfield, sir! I'm proud to be a friend of yours." He bowed, and Satterfield bowed also, with surprising dignity and grace, but he marred the effect by stumbling and catching at my shoulder for support.

"And, sir—and you boys, too," Somers went on, grinning, "now that we're all good friends——"

"Sure! Sure! O' course we are—fr'en's f'r life!" roared the mob. It was amazing how he had won their admiration.

"Well then, gentlemen, I'll let you all into a little joke," he finished. "Come up here, closer! Look at my bombs!"

He reached down and picked up his basket and displayed its contents to the men who crowded about.

To my mind it was a hazardous experiment. But again Somers had gauged the spirit of the crowd very exactly. Ten minutes earlier, perhaps, his revelation would have been fatal; but now the mob

spirit was gone. We were no longer faced by an irresponsible mob, rendered careless of consequences by numbers and the consciousness of anonymity. Now it was a group of known friends and neighbors, who stood about us, whose unmasking had left each an individual responsible for his own conduct. Each thought for himself and of himself; the unreasoning brutality of the mob was gone.

Doctor Somers' revelation was greeted with howls of mirth. This was a joke, a stupendous joke, robust, and not too subtle, which should be told against these men for years to come; how Ralph Satterfield and Charlie Bates and "Hank" Conover and fifty others had been cowed and intimidated by a dozen innocuous eggplants in the hands of one lone man! The crowd yelled with laughter, Satterfield louder than any; they pounded each other's backs, leaned on each other's shoulders, lay down in the sand and shrieked. Satterfield's illicit liquor had some part in it, no doubt; none the less it was hearty, honest laughter, so contagious that Peter and I, and even Doctor Somers, were forced to join—so friendly and jolly and carefree that no hearer could doubt its quality. Indeed Rufe Wakefield, the gigantic constable, came round the corner presently—he had been waiting there in fear and trembling, perhaps, all evening, for what might happen at the jail—and strode boldly into our midst, convinced that all danger was over.

"Here, here, you fellers!" he exclaimed in his great, bullying roar. "Quit it, now! You-all better

git outa here an' go home t' bed; yo're disturbin' th' peace!"

And so peaceable had their humor become that the crowd dispersed forthwith, still shaken with laughter and scuffling amiably for eggplants, to preserve as souvenirs of the occasion.

CHAPTER XIII

"A LITTLE RELAXATION"

SOMERS watched them out of sight. Then he turned and opened the jail door with the key Satterfield had given him. Over his shoulder he asked:

"That the constable, McGregor? Call him back, will you?"

When Rufe had strolled pompously back, puffed with pride at his success in scattering the crowd, Somers surveyed him with distaste. Over one lank shoulder, he remarked acidly: "You're a fine cop! Stick around, now. You're quite safe; the danger's all over, no thanks to you! Stay there till we come out; then I'll give you the jail key."

"And who are you, feller, that talks so biggety?" demanded Rufe.

Somers ignored him and stalked into the dark lockup. "Come on, you two," he said. "We'll give old Parker a look."

I hesitated; but, seeing that Rufe had decided to make the best of a bad business and wait to get his key back, I followed presently.

Fumbling for a switch, Somers turned on the lights. My poor nephew sat in the steel cage at the right, huddled on the edge of his bunk, chin in hands. His face was very white; he blinked in the sudden illumination, then rose and faced us with quiet defiance.

"You've come to lynch me, I suppose," he said calmly. "All right! Take me out, and let's get it over with."

"My poor boy!" I cried, moved almost to tears. If I had suffered, how dreadful this waiting must have been for him! "It's all over, Lewis! They've gone; it's all right—all right, boy!"

He shaded his eyes. Then, as they became used to the light: "Why, it's you, unk! And Peter—and old Somers! Glad to see you, Floyd, old top, how are you?"

He reached an unsteady hand through the bars and then, quite suddenly, withdrew it and fell to sobbing. "I—I'm a fool," he declared chokingly. "C-can't help it!"

I snatched the key, unlocked the inner cage, and went in to him. "There, my boy! It's all right now—all right now!" I patted his shoulder, but he turned from me and buried his face in the blankets.

"All over," repeated Somers sagely. "That's what ails him—reaction. Come along now; leave him alone. He'd rather we went; wouldn't you, Parker, old top?" The black, rumpled head nodded violently. "He prefers to do his breaking down in private," explained Somers softly. "Naturally—so do I. And between friends," he continued aloud, "I could pull a couple of weeps myself on the very slightest provocation. It's been rather a drag, you know!"

I noticed suddenly that his dark face was unwontedly sallow and colorless. His lean cheeks seemed to have hollowed further; his curiously light eyes had receded deep into their sockets.

"Buck up, Parker!" The brusque, indifferent voice wavered, almost broke. "Be back in the morning. 'By!" He herded us out before him, leaving Lewis to a solitude which, I fancy, was not unwelcome. Yet it cut me to leave the boy there so weary and broken.

Outside Somers locked the door, then beckoned Wakefield, who hung uncertainly in the nearer shadows. "Here! Take your key and get out! And mind"—his fierce hawk's face was thrust out, his pale eyes glowed coldly—"take better care of it hereafter. If anything should happen to your prisoner, Heaven help you, that's all! For I'll take the matter up with you myself." And the huge, burly constable quailed before the bitter menace of tone and gesture.

Somers gathered his bundle of papers and envelopes, rolled it loosely up and tucked it under one long arm. "Come along," he urged—almost sullenly. "Let's get home. I'm tired."

We started obediently. Peter, glowing, took the taller man's arm, though he had to reach up to do it.

"Oh, man, man!" he declared. "You're a wonder!"

"Let go!" he answered peevishly. "What's that?"

The man who had withstood so nonchalantly the menace of an angry mob flinched and gibed like a skittish colt as the shadows of a dark hallway moved, rustling.

A little, trembling voice answered. "It's only me, Dorothy. Are you—is Lewis safe?"

She came forward timidly, and now I saw that

Rosina was with her, bulkily maternal, one fat arm about the girl's slender waist.

"I—I just couldn't stay at home," she explained, talking very fast, as against an expected rebuke. "So I persuaded Rosina to come along, and started for the j-jail. I thought maybe if I talked to them, or something—I—I—— And anyway I wanted to be there my own self, if anything dreadful h-happened. I thought maybe I could s-save him."

"Yah!" sneered Doctor Somers. "Schoolgirl romantics!" His voice was unpleasant; Peter let go his arm abruptly.

"I s-suppose so," replied Dorothy meekly. "Anyway we were there, right around the corner. I came near running out, one time. But then they began to laugh that way, and I was sure, pretty near, that it must be all right. We were just starting home again."

"You ought to have had more sense," declared Somers severely. "Roaming around alone at this time of night! Didn't I tell you Parker was perfectly safe? Well, come along. McGregor, where did you park that flivver? Let's get home; there's been foolishness enough for one night."

He stalked off, and we followed. Dorothy took my arm and squeezed it. "I don't care," she whispered rebelliously. "I think he's just *mean!* Anybody'd think Lewis belonged to some other body, instead of to me. Why, I had to come, Uncle George; I l-love him! What happened, anyway?" Feminine curiosity triumphed over her pique. "What made them laugh so?"

"It was Somers," answered Peter. "He's a wonder, that man! He stood 'em off with a basket of eggplants—made 'em think they were hand grenades —bombs, you know. He bluffed 'em to a standstill. Oh, he's a prince, Somers is!"

"Yah!" said the "prince," overhearing this last. "Don't be a fool!"

Peter helped Dorothy and Rosina into the flivver's rear seat, then clambered after. "Oh, yes!" he whispered to me. "But, my word, his manners are atrocious."

In silence we drove back to Fort House. It was a clear, starlit night, and at my urging Peter left the flivver outside. To take it over to Lewis' house, lock it in the garage and walk back seemed, to my weariness, an impossible labor.

We entered the big living room, and Peter snapped on the lights. "Ho-hum!" he said, as he yawned. "I'm for bed." His pistol was in one hand, the shotgun in the other.

"Careful of that gun," said Somers. "You'll shoot somebody." He advanced to the table and laid down his big bundle of note paper. "Oh, no, Peter, my son," he went on amiably. His ill temper seemed to have dissipated itself entirely; he gave us that sudden, disarming smile. "None of you are for bed yet, except, maybe, Uncle George here." He eyed my face, which was haggard enough, I suppose, with compassion. The familiar name came from his lips with such unaffected kindliness that I warmed to him again. "You're done out, Uncle

George; better get some rest. We young folks can manage."

I shook my head. Between curiosity and stubborn pride, I was bound to remain. "I'm not superannuated yet," I told him tartly. "What are you up to now?"

Somers laughed, and it was a friendly sound. "Oh, just a little relaxation after our late excitement," he replied, unwrapping his bundle. "Peter, get ink and some pens. Dorothy"—and again the first names came so naturally, with such unassuming intimacy, that we could not but be softened—"you get your list—the addresses of all the people to whom you sent invitations. You saved it, didn't you?"

"Why, yes," said Dorothy, wondering. "What of it?"

Somers smiled at her rebellious glance. It was as if he had elected himself a member of the family and therefore ignored such little flashes of pettishness, as, I began to see, he expected us to ignore his brusqueness, his irritability.

"We've got to address all these notes," he explained, "so they can be mailed in the morning. It's pretty late, of course, but I hope most of your guests will get them in time. Don't you see"—as the girl still looked at him blankly—"your wedding's got to be postponed?"

"Oh-h! I f-forgot."

A sudden light struck me. I stared at our amazing visitor with my mouth wide open. "Is that what you wanted the paper for?"

"Of course! I've done a hundred and four. Better write fifty more, to be safe." He unfolded a note and handed it to Dorothy.

" 'Miss Mary McGregor regrets,' " she read, " 'that the marriage of her niece, Dorothy May, must be postponed indefinitely because of a serious accident.' "

"The wording may not be exactly right," Somers apologized. "I didn't have a chance to consult you about that. I thought it was as well to make the explanation rather vague."

"Why, you wonderful man!" Dorothy beamed on him, holding his long, bony hand in both of hers. "It's just perfect! How did you ever think of it? We—we've all been so upset." Her lips quivered, and her soft eyes filled with tears. It was a dreadful situation for the poor child; no wonder she had forgotten this detail.

But my mind was filled with a wondering admiration for this lank, bony alienist. He had seemed brusque, casual, culpably indifferent to our troubles; yet it was he whose ready wit had saved my nephew. And it was he who, in the hurry and excitement of planning a defense against a lynching party, had yet found time and forethought to buy this note paper and, while waiting on the jail steps for an angry mob, had coolly phrased this unexceptionable announcement and had written it over and over, more than a hundred times!

I opened an envelope at random and glanced at the note which Dorothy still held; then I picked up the last note, still unfolded and only half written. All were done in the same flowing, copper-

plate script; they seemed facsimiles, each of the other. Not a letter was misformed, not a comma out of place; "postponed," the last word of the unfinished note, was as carefully written as any, and the pen had not trembled or made a scrawl, as he laid his writing by to face the mob. Truly this Somers was a remarkable man, and I resolved that hereafter no mannerisms of his should irritate me.

Dorothy ran upstairs, to return presently with a long list of names and addresses. Somers divided the pile of envelopes, gave us each pen and ink, and set us to work around the library table.

"Working together we ought to be able to finish in two hours," he declared. "When does the morning train leave? Eight-ten? I'll take them down and get them stamped in time for that."

Silence fell, broken only by the scratching of four pens.

It might have been an hour later—the hall clock had just struck two—when Miss Christie appeared in the doorway. Her eyes were heavy, her round face was flushed with sleep, and I noted for the first time how thick and glossy was her fine, fair hair. She was muffled to the chin in a shapeless, woolly bath robe; she yawned, shielding her mouth with a slender, well-modeled hand.

"Miss McGregor can't sleep," she explained in her pleasant, throaty drawl. "She sent me out to ask if you-all aren't ever going to bed?" Her eyes widened a little; they were beautiful eyes; and a demure smile tugged at her mouth corners. "She says nobody thinks about her any more; and she

wants to see you, Miss Dorothy. She says she just knows something underhand is going on in this house, and everybody's trying to keep it from her." And then, with a flash of curiosity unusual in her, normally the most incurious of women, she asked: "What *has* happened anyway? And why are you-all sitting up so late?"

"Doctor Parker was nearly lynched to-night," said Peter. "But it's all right now; and Somers can prove he couldn't have killed Gaskell anyhow—that the body was cold before he came out."

"Oh-h-h!" Miss Christie's cheeks went white, and her violet eyes opened. Again a sudden shock had brought startling beauty into her dull face. After a breathless moment she disappeared.

"Go see to your aunt, Dorothy," said Somers, his eyes still fixed on the waving portières. "We'll finish these up."

When she had gone, he sat for a moment, staring absently at the doorway. "Hypothyroidism," he murmured vaguely. "You know, Uncle George, that girl's got the makings of a raving beauty in her!"

"Who, Dorothy? She's a beauty now," I replied.

"Huh? Oh, she's well enough, but I meant the other one, Miss Christie. Wait till I've treated her a while, and you'll see what I mean."

He sighed, passed a lank, bony hand across his eyes, and picked up his pen once more: "Mr. and Mrs. R. Lawton McGregor, 42 Bank Street, Toronto, Canada."

CHAPTER XIV

THE POLTERGEIST AGAIN

IT must have been half past three when I stumbled up to my room at last, stripped off my clothes almost automatically, and fell into bed. I was asleep in two minutes.

It was the deep, dreamless sleep of exhaustion, from which one does not wake immediately, with every sense alert. No; I must climb, as it were, up from the very bottom of a black abyss of unconsciousness, a sea of oblivion, struggling with infinite pains back toward the light. For hours, as it seemed, I fought my way stubbornly through a welter of half-seen dreams, in response to some imperative summons whose nature, even, my sleep-drugged senses refused to grasp.

At last I came out from sleep into wakefulness suddenly, as a train whizzes out of a long tunnel into the daylight. I sat up, blinking. It was still dark; somewhere in the distance a rooster crowed. That did not aid me in fixing the time, for in North Carolina the cocks crow all night; but now I saw that the east was faintly gray, and I heard the first shrill whistle of an early-rising quail.

By that I knew dawn must be near at hand. But why had I waked so early? What was the insistent call which had dragged me back from deep slumber? I blinked bewilderedly.

Then suddenly a chill swept over me; an eerie horripilation crept up my spine and plucked at the short hairs of my neck. As I shivered with actual, physical cold, I saw that some one or something had drawn back the blanket, so that I lay uncovered almost to my knees. Then, as I leaned forward, clutching after the coverlets, they moved beneath my hand, as though by their own independent volition!

I gave a strangled gasp; perhaps I cried aloud. I am not sure, for the thing shook me. At any rate, in the pale gray light of coming dawn, I saw my blanket creep swiftly, silently, over the foot of the bed and move toward the door.

No one was in sight. My eyes, from which sleep was miraculously purged, raced about the empty room and saw its every detail distinctly. There was the dresser, the rocking chair whereon hung my clothes, the corner table, every familiar furnishing. Beyond the foot of my bed the door stood half open, and through it my blanket and counterpane were moving in a white, undulating mass, that seemed curiously and uncannily alive. And still there was no sound, no stir.

I grew cold and rheumatic. Perhaps I hesitated for an instant, daunted by this mysterious phenomenon. But it was not more than three seconds, I am sure, before I was out of bed and standing at the door, ready for—for whatever cursed thing might lurk there.

There was nothing. The hall stood empty and still, as commonplace as at high noon. I ran to the

head of the stairs and leaned over the balustrade. The broad staircase stood empty, also, and the lower hall, as far as my eye could reach. Everything was very still, so that I heard the loud ticking of the grandfather clock below me. But of my nocturnal visitor, if visitor there had been, and of my coverlets, there was no sign at all. Both had vanished.

A door creaked, and I spun about, nerves tense as fiddlestrings. It was Doctor Somers, more lathy and slender of limb in his pajamas than by day, if that were possible.

"Nightmare?" he inquired sourly. "You yelled horribly."

Peter appeared beside him, dwarfed by the other's lank height; and Dorothy's smooth black head peered from her door.

I blushed hotly. I must have made an extraordinary racket, to wake all these tired young folks! "I'm sorry, people," I said apologetically. "Either I've had a nightmare, or it was the Poltergeist again."

"Humph!" said Somers and looked at me queerly. "Poltergeist?"

"I don't know. Either I dreamed it all, or my blankets just climbed over the footboard and walked away by themselves. They're gone, anyhow."

Dorothy came out, wrapped in her fuzzy blue robe, hair hanging in two sleek braids to her knees. "Oh, dear!" said she and peeped into my room. "Yes, they're gone. That best white wool blanket, Peter, and the crocheted counterpane. It must have been the Poltergeist!"

"I'm c-cold," I muttered, suddenly conscious of my thin pajamas.

"Poor old dear! You climb right back into bed and let Peter tuck you in. Here!" Dorothy opened the linen closet at the end of the hall and dragged out more blankets. "Cover him up, Peter; we'll look for the other things in the morning. No telling what the Poltergeist has done with them!"

"Humph!" repeated Somers. He cocked his head on one side, and, in his pajamas, whose wide stripes, running up and down, accentuated his height and lankiness, he looked like some new variety of long-legged bird—a striped crane.

"Humph! Poltergeist! That's interesting." His tone held an impersonal enthusiasm, as of a surgeon confronted with some new and rare disease; I was reminded of the manner in which he had pronounced Miss Christie's sleepiness due to "hypothyroidism," whatever that may be. "A Poltergeist! Then such things have happened here before?"

Dorothy nodded. "Yes, the nasty thing's been hanging round for a year, almost, playing tricks like this, breaking dishes, yelling through the halls, and everything."

"Humph! Well, let's get back to bed. I'll look into this later."

"Ask Aunt Mary," suggested Peter grimly. "She'll talk your arm off about spiritism, if you once get her started."

"I haven't had the pleasure of meeting your aunt yet," replied Somers. Then he yawned and went back into his room.

I went back to bed, to shiver beneath my new blankets. It was not really cold, but I was chilled through. And what with fatigue and excitement and the honest fright of watching my blankets creep away in that eerie fashion, I could not get to sleep again. Moreover, bobwhite had tuned up in earnest now. The shrill, insistent whistling of a dozen quail, calling and answering each other under my window, effectually barred me from further rest. The high-pitched, monotonous call rang through my aching head maddeningly.

At last, it might have been seven o'clock, I did doze off, to waken with a start an hour later. I rose then and dressed. Dorothy was just coming from her rooms; she gave me a brave smile.

"Good morning, my dear! You're fresh as a rose."

She was wearing a little blue morning gown, her mass of black hair neatly dressed, and she was smiling. One of the many things I found to admire in Dorothy McGregor was this: that she was always good-natured, even in the morning. No matter how early one saw her, she was never peevish or sullen, in spite of a hot, flashing, little temper.

"Good morning, Uncle George. Did you get any rest at all?"

I sighed. "Oh, a little. Where's Somers?"

"I haven't heard anything of him. Tired out, I suppose."

There was no need to ask where Peter was, for I could hear his lusty snores through his bedroom door. So we two went downstairs together.

"We'll have our breakfast," declared Dorothy.

"Aunt Mary'll be waiting, and she hates to eat alone. The others can eat when they get up. They had a hard night, poor boys!"

But, as we came through the big living room, the front door opened and Doctor Somers entered. His lean, sallow face wore its customary look of acute dissatisfaction with the universe; it was neither more nor less saturnine than when I had first set eyes on it, scarcely more than twelve hours ago. The strain of last night had left no visible mark upon him.

We gave him a good morning, to which he replied with a sour grunt. "Been to the post office," he explained. "They're poor stamps your postmaster sells here; no stick to 'em at all. Had to buy a bottle of mucilage."

"You poor man! And did you stamp and mail all those notes?"

Somers shrugged. "It had to be done," he declared ungraciously.

We went on into the dining room. Before we could be seated, the creaking of her wheel chair announced Aunt Mary's coming. Dorothy rang the bell.

"Quick, Rosina! Get auntie's coffee!"

Miss McGregor appeared, the patient nurse at her back. The old lady's face wore its usual pathetic smile, and she inclined her head to us with sad graciousness.

Somers' eyes traveled past her. "Good morning, Miss Christie!"

The nurse bowed shyly; her big, violet eyes dropped, and a tinge of color crept into her cheek.

Aunt Mary's stately head came up. Her thin eyebrows arched. "I don't think I've had the honor——"

"Oh, forgive me, auntie! I'd forgotten you didn't come out to supper last night. This is Doctor Somers, Aunt Mary; Dr. Somers, my aunt, Miss McGregor. The doctor is—was to be—Lewis' best man, you know."

"Ah, of course! And how do you do, doctor?" Miss McGregor's tone was cool, to say the least. Her manner implied that Somers would have done much better to stay in his lunatic asylum. "It's so unfortunate that you made that long trip for nothing; you're from New York, I think? Quite so. You won't be able to get back to your practice before Wednesday, even by starting to-night, will you? It's a great inconvenience, but then this dreadful affair has inconvenienced everybody. It has upset me terribly—though that, of course, amounts to nothing!"

Her tone, however, suggested that it was the most important consequence of Doctor Gaskell's death; and that we others had deliberately planned the killing to annoy her, Mary McGregor. It was truly remarkable, the unpleasant suggestions Aunt Mary managed to convey by a turn of the eye, an arching of her high, thin brows, a pathetic inflection of her sweet, plaintive voice, and all with the kindest, bravest, most self-sacrificing manner in the world. I could still understand how casual visitors considered her an uncomplaining heroine, a saint on earth; but I was no longer inclined to share their opinion.

Doctor Somers smiled at her in his sudden, heart-warming fashion, no whit ruffled by her attitude. "But I'm not going back just yet," he explained. "The hospital will do very well without me; I wrote this morning for a month's leave. I shan't go back until we've got poor old Parker safe out of jail."

Aunt Mary looked dubious. "Can you make them think he did it in self-defense?"

He smiled again. "Something like that. But tell me, Miss McGregor, how did you rest last night?"

She softened visibly. "Very poorly indeed. I'm a great sufferer, doctor, a great sufferer. I worry so about my niece." She cast a bitter glance at Dorothy, who winced. "I lay awake for hours, just thinking about her troubles, until the knots came in my neck so terribly that I could have screamed. You know, being a doctor, of course."

Aunt Mary looked at Somers eagerly, a bit apprehensively, I fancied. But he nodded gravely. "I know," he assured her. *"Torticollis ephemeralis!* Yes, indeed, a very painful ailment." His air of serious sympathy was admirable.

"Yes, isn't it? Well, I kept thinking, I must be patient; I must try to comfort poor Dorothy in her trials. She's not used to suffering, as I am. I mustn't notice it if her worries make her heedless and self-absorbed; she doesn't mean to be inconsiderate. I won't make it harder for her by complaining. I was so sorry, dear"—turning to the poor girl, who looked supremely uncomfortable—"so sorry that I had to wake Miss Christie and send her out last night—this morning, rather. I knew, if you hadn't been so

upset, you'd have remembered that I never can sleep when there's so much going on in the house. I know you didn't mean to be selfish, and so I stood it just as long as I could."

Dorothy sighed deeply. "Here, auntie, try this piece of toast; it's crisper. Rosina, fill auntie's cup. Yes, dear, drink another cup of coffee. It'll do you good."

Doctor Somers came to the rescue with a deft question, and presently Aunt Mary was beaming upon him, discussing her symptoms with infinite relish. The charm of an intelligent and sympathetic listener brought unwonted color to her delicately faded cheek; her rigid pose relaxed; her eyes shone brighter. Absently she finished her second cup of coffee and ate three more slices of toast, talking all the while. Aunt Mary was enjoying herself thoroughly.

We others rose and slipped out, leaving her in the midst of an animated account of the strange sensations in her limbs. "You see, doctor, I've been paralyzed in both limbs for fourteen years now, never able to leave my chair except for bed. I have to be lifted and carried about like a baby. And for years my limbs were perfectly numb and dead; but lately I've had the queerest feelings—creepy, prickly feelings. Do you suppose it's atrophy?"

Somers nodded gravely. "No doubt! Your muscles are wasting away, and the spinal cord is affected, I think."

"Oh, he's making her out worse than she is!"

whispered Dorothy, horrified. "He'll scare her to death!"

"Hush!" I told her. "Can't you see she loves it?"

"I resigned myself to that long ago, doctor—not being able to stand on my feet ever again. But the queer feelings, and those terrible knots in my neck——"

We slipped out. Doctor Somers listened attentively, nodding at intervals, but his keen, gray-green eyes were all for the silent nurse.

CHAPTER XV

A FISHING TRIP

DOROTHY, Peter, and I set off at once for the lockup. "I've just got to see my poor boy," said the girl tearfully. "Think what an awful time he must have had last night!"

She trotted about the house, busily ordering the fat Rosina here and there, and presently she called us to her aid.

"There!" said she proudly, pointing out two huge bundles. "Clean sheets and pillowcases in that one, and a blanket—you know, Uncle George, Rosina found your blanket and counterpane this morning, the ones the Poltergeist took? They were down in the coal bin, wadded up, and they were just filthy! Oh, dear! I wish the horrid thing wouldn't break and destroy and dirty everything it touches. It's a perfectly wretched ghost, Uncle George, so malicious!"

She carried it off gayly enough, but her big eyes were restless, and I fancied a hint of fear in their depths. After all, though familiarity may make a ghost less terrible, no one really enjoys its repeated visits. And, though she pretended so much courage and jested so gayly about the tricks of the Poltergeist, I saw that she was haunted by a very real fear of its comings. The poor child was near the breaking point.

"There, there, dearie," I comforted her. "Don't

you fret; everything'll come right yet. We'll have you married off and settled happily in a bright little red-and-white bungalow, without any ghosts to bother you. Be brave just a little while longer, child!"

She huddled against my shoulder and wept quietly. "I c-can't help it, dear," she declared. I'll be a-all right p-presently. But things are so darn twisted! And that was my very best counterpane, and I was s-saving it for our h-house—and I'm a-f-fraid of ghosts. I am so! And my beau's in jail, and the wedding put off—and it's unlucky to postpone weddings, Uncle George. And Aunt Mary's just m-mean to me, and I'm s-so unhappy!"

What could I say? I patted her shoulder silently, and presently she dabbed at her eyes with a handkerchief, rolled up into a damp ball, and smiled up at me bravely.

"I'm all right now, dear," she told me and ran off to powder her nose.

So I shouldered a huge bundle of bedding and took a basket of eatables in my left hand and descended the steps to Lewis' flivver, while Peter followed, even more heavily laden. "Time we get through and old Parker's out, we can advertise: 'Apartment to rent, luxuriously furnished; apply at the jail.'"

I went back after another load and on the way peeped into the dining room. Aunt Mary still held forth, as fresh as if she had just begun. Rosina's face peeped around the edge of the kitchen door. She was wondering, no doubt, if they'd ever give her a chance to "cl'ar away." Somers still listened

with courteous attention, but the eye he turned to me held a comical appeal for aid.

"We're going down to see my nephew now, Somers," I said. "Want to come along?"

Aunt Mary sighed, her thin eyebrows arched high. "That's always the way," her expression said; "if ever I'm enjoying myself somebody has to spoil it!" But aloud she declared: "Yes, doctor, don't let me keep you. I've enjoyed our little chat so much, but of course Dorothy's wishes come first. I realize that; and it's quite natural. I'm used to being alone!"

Somers gave her a sympathetic glance. "I suppose I ought to go," he replied reluctantly; but he rose with suspicious alacrity. "Perhaps when I get back, Miss McGregor—yours is a very interesting case—I'd like to hear more about it."

Aunt Mary shrugged, as much as to say: "Why go away then?" "I always lie down after breakfast," she replied.

Somers looked relieved. "Well, some other time then." His greenish eyes rested significantly upon the silent nurse. "You ought to get out of doors more," he told her. "You need exercise."

Miss McGregor sniffed. "Oh, she's healthy enough! You should see her sleep!" Aunt Mary always resented the suggestion that any one else was not well; she felt that she had a monopoly of invalidism for the McGregor family.

Our guest bowed and came out with me. "My," he exclaimed, "what a talker!"

"Well, come along!"

He shook his head. "I'm not coming, thanks. Tell old Parker I'll see him later. I've got other things to do."

So I left him and went out to the racketing flivver, whose rear seat was heaped high. I squeezed in beside Dorothy and Peter in front.

"Where's Somers, unk?" asked the latter.

"Not coming. He doesn't seem very keen to see Lewis, after all."

"Well! That's queer. He's cooking up some other deep scheme, I suppose. I shan't find fault with him, after last night."

"Probably you're right, Peter," I conceded.

But Dorothy, beside me, wriggled impatiently. "You two men are perfectly blind! He's just waiting for Aunt Mary to lie down, so he can see Miss Christie."

We both laughed. "What, that sleepy thing?"

"Yes! If you had any eyes at all, you could see he was perfectly struck on her. And she may be a sleepy thing, but just you watch her brighten up, once there's a man around to notice her. Oh, you can laugh! But I tell you Anne Christie is a *beauty*, if she'd just wake up a little."

"She's too fat," objected Peter.

Dorothy gave him a maddeningly superior smile. "And they say men are the best judges of a woman's looks! Wait till you see her in an evening dress, instead of those horrid, stiff, old uniforms! Oh, yes, you will! I'll just bet you ten pounds of candy against a carton of cigarettes she begins to dress up within a week!"

We hunted up a very sheepish constable and told him our errand. He handed the jail key over to me.

"Yeah," he said, "you jus' take it along, an' bring it back w'en you git through. Don't forgit t' lock th' door after yuh. Yeah, shore it'll be all right! Nobody don't need t' know you got it, does they? An' say"—coming closer and dropping his voice to a hoarse whisper—"they ain't no need o' tellin' about las' night, is they?"

It was a bribe, I saw: free access to the jail against silence as to Rufe Wakefield's inglorious part in last night's troubles. He knew he was safe enough in giving me the key, irregular as it seems; for my nephew would not have dreamed of escaping, even if I would have allowed it.

"All right, Rufe," I promised. "We'll keep quiet; and I'll have the key back to you before noon."

All this had taken some little time. As we drove back down Main Street, Dorothy nudged me sharply. "What did I tell you?"

We swung round the corner, past Olsen's drug store, to reach the jail, which was almost directly behind it. And on the drug store steps, just going in, stood Miss Anne Christie, while Doctor Somers held the screen door back for her, with a long, skinny arm.

"She does carry herself well," said Peter critically.

Dorothy sniffed. "I think he might be doing something for Lewis, instead of gallivanting round with that girl!"

We drove on to the lockup, to find my nephew haggard, but fairly cheerful.

"Rufe brought me in a gorgeous breakfast," he told us. "Really, he's not such a bad chap. Yes, I got quite a bit of sleep, too, but I'll be glad of clean sheets. There, there, honey!" Dorothy had choked forlornly, snuggling close to his shoulder. "Don't worry any more; old Somers'll figure out some way of getting me out in a day or two."

"But to-morrow was our wedding day!" she exclaimed disconsolately. "And, besides, your precious Somers is just flirting with Aunt Mary's nurse; he's not trying to do a thing for us!"

However she did her bridegroom's prospective best man something less than justice. It might have been an hour later, while we four still sat with our heads together, cudgeling our brains for a way out, that he strolled casually in.

I heard the outer doorknob rattle and started up, for I had forgotten to lock the door after us, and I feared some official visitor. Before I could reach it, the heavy door swung back, and Somers' black head appeared.

"Thought I'd find you folks here," he said. "Ought to be locked in, though; people might talk about our vigilant cop." He turned the key on the inside and paused to laugh silently.

"Clever chap, that Wakefield," he went on, advancing. His long, grotesquely thin legs moved stiffly, like a pair of compasses. "I heard him talking about that little affair last night; he's out on Main Street, holding forth right now. 'An' I stood

right there beside the lockup,' he was saying, 'ready f'r bus'ness. 'At skinny feller come in on Number Seven, he stood on th' steps 'ith a bumb, darin' 'em t' come any furder. They was all a-yellin', an' they wouldn't of paid him no mind, but then *I* come out 'ith th' ole persuader'—and he showed them that rusty pocket cannon he lugs around—'an', "Stan' back, fellers!" I says. We-ell, they all knew *me!* An' so they wa'n't no lynchin' las' night!'"

We all laughed. Somers' imitation of the constable's rumbling drawl was irresistibly comic.

"So that's what he's telling!" A light struck me. "No wonder he didn't want us to talk about last night! He bribed us to keep quiet, doctor, by letting us take the jail key."

"I told you you had a clever constable, unk. Oh, I've learned lots of things this morning! I've talked with a number of your leading citizens, so I have."

"When we saw you, you were otherwise occupied," said Dorothy cruelly. "Or is Miss Christie one of the 'leading citizens' you meant?"

Somers merely smiled at her. "Oh, that! I took her to the drug store to get some thyroid extract. The girl's sick, and I'm going to cure her. Wait a couple of weeks; you won't know her!"

"And after you got the medicine?" I prompted, curious to know how he had forgathered with Wakefield.

"Oh, Miss Christie introduced me to the druggist, Olsen, then she went on home. And I hung around, making myself agreeable. Just a little fishing expedition, Uncle George—that's all!"

CHAPTER XVI

SOME CLEWS, AND A SUGGESTION

HIS light eyes sparkled at us, and gratified pride replaced his usual look of acute dissatisfaction with the world. "Old Doc Somers is a great man!" he boasted.

We all stared at him, breathlessly eager. "What have you found out?" I demanded.

"A whole lot of things; enough so we can begin planning a defense for Parker."

Peter straightened at the word. "A defense! Of course he'll have to be tried now, won't he? Folks, we've got to hire a lawyer right away!"

Dorothy and I nodded agreement. Lewis said nothing at all.

"There'll be a trial, yes," said Somers; "that is, if the grand jury indicts. And I haven't much doubt that it will; you see, your man Vanbrugh, your prosecuting attorney that pleased you all so much at the inquest, will present the evidence against Parker. Yes, he'll be indicted—I haven't a doubt of it."

"So we need a lawyer," insisted Peter.

"We-ell, not to be too modest about it, I'm a tolerable lawyer myself, McGregor. You see, I started out to make myself a medicolegal expert; to specialize in medical jurisprudence. I studied law first; I was admitted to the bar six years ago, and

I practiced a little while before I entered the medical school."

I looked at him more closely. Last night, knowing him to be my nephew's classmate, I had thought him thirty, at the most. No doubt my knowledge of Lewis' age had influenced me; moreover Somers had one of those lean, dark faces on which the years leave little mark. But now, by the morning sun which streamed through the unshaded windows of the jail, I could see that he was older. His black hair was shot with gray over the temples; there were fine lines in his forehead and about the corners of his deep-set eyes. He must be at least thirty-eight —perhaps older. No wonder he had impressed me as more mature than Peter or Lewis!

"Yes, I'm a lawyer," he went on, "and not such a bad lawyer, either. In a case like this, where the medical testimony will be so important, perhaps I'd do as well as another. That's up to you, of course, Parker. If you want somebody else, I'll do all I can to help, just the same."

Lewis shook his head vigorously. "No! I don't want anybody else, if you'll only help me out, old man."

"Well, then"—he made no protest of willingness, no fervid promises of success; he took the matter as settled, and I liked that in him—"to begin with, we'll take it for granted that there'll be a trial—unless in the meantime we manage to find the murderer."

"You think he was murdered, then?" asked Dorothy fearfully.

"He must have been. He surely didn't shoot himself and then swallow the gun."

"But you—but Lewis——" she faltered.

"But Lewis didn't do it! Of course not. Gaskell was dead before he got there. But our trouble will be to prove that. If Uhlman here gets up and swears Gaskell's body was cold when he got to it, five minutes after he heard the shot, your prosecuting attorney—your solicitor, as they call him—will ask why he didn't say so at the time; why Wakefield didn't notice it; why it wasn't brought out at the inquest. And what can you say, Uhlman, except that you didn't think of it until I asked you about it? Then your man Vanbrugh will say: 'Ah, you didn't remember this very important point until the learned counsel for the defense explained it to you?'—with a significant glance at the jury. And then: 'And you're related to the prisoner, aren't you, Mr. Uhlman? His uncle, I think, yes? And you're fond of him, aren't you—very fond of him, in fact? Exactly!' And he'll give the jury another wise look and tell you to step down."

I nodded soberly. "But—but then they'll convict him!" said Dorothy.

"Oh, no—at least we'll hope not. But the best way to defend him is to find out who really committed the murder; don't you see? So let's talk it over."

Somers settled himself more comfortably and recrossed those extraordinary legs.

"To begin with I had a chat with your constable. Had it occurred to you to wonder how he happened

to be coming past Fort House at five in the morning, just at the right time to hear Parker shoot? No? Well, I thought of it. He'd been out at a little poker party, an all-night session at Tulliver's, back on the hill. He lost fifty dollars, too; it made him mad, and that, I suspect, was behind his zeal in enforcing the ordinance about discharging firearms in the corporation. He had been drinking! Officially, I've no doubt that the amiable Rufus is an ardent prohibitionist; but unofficially he likes his toddy. Corn liquor was plenty up on the hill, it appears; and Rufe was too much under its influence to notice details; didn't you know that, Uncle George?"

"I—I——" I stammered. "We were all so upset that I didn't think it odd that he seemed so, too. But, now that you speak of it, he did seem rather—rather uncertain."

"Humph! It makes it bad for us, too. When Vanbrugh gets hold of him, Wakefield will swear to almost anything, just to prove he was sober enough to know all that happened. Well, here's another thing. You know this chap Satterfield—Ralph Satterfield? He led the mob last night. Did he have any grudge against Gaskell?"

"Why, yes," answered Lewis and I together. "Gaskell was one of the town commissioners. And during May he was acting mayor. Satterfield was brought before him for being drunk and disorderly and for bootlegging, and Gaskell gave him thirty days on the roads."

"And that's not all, Uncle George," my nephew

went on. "Remember there at Olsen's he bragged that he was going to settle with Gaskell?"

"All right," said Somers. "Satterfield was at the poker party, too. Tulliver has a phone; about four o'clock somebody called Satterfield up there, and he went out in a great hurry, saying he'd be back in an hour. What's more, he went out the back door, and Tulliver's shotgun stood right beside it. I got all this firsthand, by a little judicious questioning, partly from Rufe, and partly from another chap who was there. Mind you, we don't know that Satterfield took that gun; but he might have taken it and brought it back with him. Nobody was out that way while he was gone.

"He came back in an hour or so, very much out of breath. When somebody asked him where he'd been, he drew a pistol and threatened to kill the fellow. They quieted him down; but, as they were all more or less drunk, they didn't think much about it. But it's worth looking into, especially as it seems Satterfield's daughter, Minnie, is your night telephone operator. Olsen phoned for Doctor Gaskell to come and see his sick baby; and this girl put the call through, and no doubt listened in; night operators usually do. Right after that, as I figure it, she called up Tulliver's house and gave a message to her father."

"Why, it's open and shut!" I exclaimed excitedly. "She told her father Gaskell was going out. Satterfield knew he'd take the short cut, that path through the Fort House grounds; it's the nearest way to Olsen's. He took Tulliver's gun and ran down there,

while the doctor was dressing, and lay in wait for him and killed him!"

"It's possible," conceded Somers. "We'll investigate, at least. And, if we can't hang it on him, we'll bring it up at the trial, anyhow. It will go to show that somebody else might have done the shooting."

"Oh, the trial, the trial!" It was Dorothy, impatiently tearful. "You keep talking about a trial, and that'll be weeks and weeks, maybe months! And all that time my poor Lewis will have to stay in this horrid old jail, and—and t-to-morrow was our wedding day! Oh, dear, oh, dear! What shall I do?"

The poor girl broke down completely and wept without restraint, hanging upon her lover's neck.

Somers looked at her keenly. "What do you want to do?"

She sobbed. "I was going to be married to-morrow, and my wedding dress is all ready, and the cake baked, even! And now Lewis is in j-jail for weeks and months—and maybe they'll c-convict him or something, and we c-can't ever be married at all! And I'll die an old maid, because I won't ever marry any other body!"

"Humph! Get married, then."

"And it's just awfully unlucky to put off your wedding day, and—and——" She broke off suddenly, raising a tear-stained face, as the meaning of Somers' words struck home. "Get m-married? What do you mean?"

"What I say. Your wedding dress is ready, you

say, and the cake is baked. Well, here I am, too, a perfectly good best man. And there's Parker; and here's the jail. There's a preacher in town, I suppose. We've got the freedom of the lockup, thanks to Rufe Wakefield; why not have your wedding right here to-morrow, on schedule time?"

CHAPTER XVII

AN UNUSUAL WEDDING

A BIG tear still undried on her cheek, Dorothy stared at the tall, lanky Somers. Her blank wonderment gradually merged into admiration, and a very becoming blush crept over her fair face.

"Get married to-morrow—anyway?" she asked. "Why—why not? I think it would be just lovely." She grew more animated as this new idea shaped itself before her imagination. "We couldn't have a big wedding anyway, after all this horrid trouble —not for months and *months!* And just think of the expense! New invitations, new flowers, another wedding dress, and everything. And Aunt Mary's been so upset, getting ready for the house guests, and there'd be that to go through with again. And think, Lewis! We'd have to pay rent on our house all that time, without being able to live in it. Oh, I think it would be just lovely! We can bring the flowers down here and decorate the place and have our wedding breakfast right here; just the family, and maybe Marie and Sally Westfall," naming her bridesmaids. "We'll do it! Of course we will! Peter, run over to the depot and see if the flowers have come. I'll have roses over there, and a bank of ferns, and——"

Her happy, excited voice trailed away, as she ran a calculating eye about the bare, cramped place, planning her decorations with truly feminine adaptability.

But my nephew caught her hand. "No, Dorothy!" he cried miserably. "No, honey girl. You know I'd just love it, but I can't let you. You're forgetting; I'm in prison, charged with murder. I'll have to stay here for weeks, anyhow; and then I may be convicted and executed, or worse yet, given life imprisonment. And then you'd be tied for life to a convict, honey; you'd be worse than a widow. No, you must give me up, and maybe, in a year or two, you'll find somebody else and be married and find happiness after all. And it would be a comfort to me, there in prison, to know your life hadn't been ruined, too."

The boy straightened, looking very noble and self-sacrificing. His eyes were moist; I fancy that he found a dismal enjoyment in the thought of this great renunciation. He pictured himself in stripes, no doubt, wandering alone down the long corridor of years, upborne by his own self-sacrifice. The young have a way of enjoying tragedy—in prospect, at least.

But Dorothy only laughed at him. "Fiddlesticks! You're *not* going to be convicted. You're *not!* I won't have it! You won't even have to be tried; Doctor Somers will find the man who really did it, and you'll be home with me in a week, maybe! And, if you're not, I won't ever, ever, *ever* marry any other body—so there! I guess I can be noble too! And we're going to be married at noon to-morrow, right here in this jail, so you might as well make the best of it!"

Dropping on the narrow bunk beside him she began to whisper eagerly into his ear.

Well, that was all of that. There are limits to any man's capacity for self-abnegation, and Lewis was very human. Who could have resisted Dorothy McGregor's sweet pleading, her flushed, bright-eyed anticipation of this pitiful wedding, so different from that she had planned?

"And really," she argued wisely, "it'll be lots nicer than a big church affair—lots! I shan't have to get all tired out running around, looking after a lot of guests we don't care anything about, getting ice cream spilled on my wedding dress, and having the ushers put all the wrong people into the wrong pews. I've been worried out of my life for weeks, just imagining what would happen if they should seat Cousin John beside Uncle Will Marshall. They haven't spoken for twenty years, you know. Oh, this'll be so much better. Why, it's just sweet!"

Lewis smiled bitterly. "'Sweet,'" he repeated, "marrying a man—in a jail!" But his protest was uncertain, and Dorothy paid no attention to it whatever. He had capitulated; she knew it well enough, and we all recognized it. From that time on my nephew had no more voice in the arrangement of his wedding than has any other well-conducted bridegroom.

In the midst of our excited talk some one tried the jail door. We all stopped short, alarmed, the memory of last night's attack fresh in our minds. Then Somers, shrugging resignedly, opened the big door, which he had locked again after Peter's exit.

In the aperture appeared the wide-brimmed hat and leathery, lined face of High Sheriff Redden.

He blinked at us queerly, his red-rimmed, rheumy eyes taking in the unusual scene before him; for Dorothy and Lewis sat hand in hand on the narrow bunk, while I huddled uncomfortably on the floor, my back to the cage bars, with a bundle of the McGregors' best bed linen for a divan. It was a curious spectacle for a well-conducted jail, to say the least.

The sheriff swept off his hat and bowed deeply. "Mornin', ma'am," he said to the girl deferentially. "Howdy, folks! You-all aim t' be comf'table as you kin, I see." He fingered his wispy white mustache and turned to Somers. "Howdy, stranger! F'om Rufe's story you an' him saved my pris'ner f'om gittin' lynched las' night—or, anyways, it was Rufe mostly, accordin' to his tell."

He winked elaborately at the physician. Over his shoulder appeared the anxious face of the huge constable. Wakefield shook a leonine head in agonized appeal, winked frantically, laid a finger to his lips, begging dumbly for our silence.

Somers grinned. "Oh, yes! Mr. Wakefield showed the best part of valor, certainly."

"H'm! Yuh cain't tell me nothin' about Rufe Wakefield, stranger. But I'm obliged to yuh, sir. They'd of been right smart talk round Carabas County if anythin' had happened to one of Hank Redden's prisoners. Ain't aimin' t' have no lynchin's hereabouts, w'ile *I'm* sheriff! Nossir!"

He extended a gnarled hand gravely, looking Somers up and down. "Yo're lengthy enough t'

give anybody a battle, stranger," he drawled, "even if they ain't s' much to yuh crossways."

Somers laughed. "We can't all be fat, sheriff."

Redden fingered his wispy mustache. He was thin to emaciation. "H'm, I reckon not. An' now, folks, this here ain't quite reg'lar. I know it's all right, but Rufe hadn't ought to of give you-all that key. I'm responsible f'r havin' Doc Parker here guarded right. Cain't let things go on this a way; folks 'ud talk."

"Oh, Mr. Redden," said Dorothy prettily, "you won't make it any harder for us? Why, Lewis and I are going to be married to-morrow!"

"H'm," said the sheriff. His watery eyes blinked rapidly, but I fancied that their pale gaze softened. "H'm! Aimin' t' git married here?"

"Uh-huh," said Dorothy, like a little, bashful schoolgirl.

Peter pushed in, breathless. "The flowers have come. Shall I bring 'em here?"

"We-ell, I be dogged! H'm! Yessum!" The sheriff's face cleared. "I reckon I c'n fix it up, ma'am—anyways, if you'll invite me to it."

"Why, of course! I was counting on you to give me away," declared Dorothy shamelessly. "My aunt can't come; she's paralyzed, you know; and Uncle George couldn't do it very well because he's Lewis' uncle. *Will* you, sheriff?"

"I jus' reckon I will, ma'am! W'y, twenty mewels couldn't keep me away. Hold up yore right hand, stranger, and you, McGregor, an' you, Mr. Uhlman. I deppytize you-all. Yo're depitty sheriffs

of the County of Carabas, State of No'th Carolina, charged with th' guardin' of this here pris'ner an' responsible fer his body to me. You c'n keep them keys now, gentlemen. Rufe, you got to feed 'im yit; you c'n fix it up 'ith them t' let you in, mealtimes."

And with no more formality than this, we became deputy sheriffs. Mr. Redden departed presently, promising to return for the ceremony to-morrow; and, before we had settled all details and departed homeward for lunch, an ancient roadster rattled up to the jail door and the lean, tobacco-chewing deputy sheriff from the county jail appeared in the doorway.

"Here," said he laconically, as he thrust a package at me. "Sheriff says t' wear 'em whenever yuh come round th' jail."

I unwrapped the newspaper to find three stars; Peter, Somers, and I pinned them to our coat fronts, not without pride. We were officers of the law!

The preparations for this most unconventional wedding went merrily on. We ate a hurried lunch, scarcely heeding Aunt Mary's acid comments. She would never have given her consent to such an insane proceeding, if she'd been asked. But no one ever considered her; she was used to being ignored. Such a disgrace—to be married in a common jail! What were young people coming to, anyhow? No modesty, no idea of common decency, even. Why, the very thought of this monstrous proceeding sent queer feelings all up and down her spine! She could feel the knots coming in her neck already. But of course that was nothing; she'd be the last to expect any consideration for *her* sufferings. Thank Heaven

she was given strength and patience to bear them without a murmur! "Take me to my room, Miss Christie, please; I can't eat one mouthful. I don't believe I shall survive this blow, but, no doubt, it's for the best. A poor, crippled old woman like me —I shall be glad to die and find rest in the grave! Ah, well, you might wait until I finish my tea, nurse!"

Presently Miss McGregor was wheeled away, and we all sighed our relief at her going. "Don't forget to take your tablet, Miss Christie!" Somers called after them.

The nurse nodded and smiled over her shoulder, a becoming color in her round cheeks.

"In-deed!" murmured Aunt Mary to herself, quite audibly, as the wheel chair disappeared. "Every one needs medical attention except me, it appears. Pity her sufferings wouldn't keep her awake!"

After lunch we hurried back to the jail, of which we were now free officially and regularly. And all that afternoon and evening I risked my aged, rheumatic limbs upon a wabbly stepladder, arranging draperies, hanging wreaths, tacking up ferns, until the lockup had become a bower of beauty. Peter ran errands indefatigably, and Somers, whose lathy length needed no ladder, worked at my side, performing prodigies of reaching with those lank arms. Dorothy bossed us all unmercifully; and poor Lewis was driven from one corner to another. His toes were trodden on, he was abused roundly for getting in the way, and generally made to feel as useless and unnecessary as any other bridegroom.

The last straw was added when Dorothy ordered us to heap his bunk with roses and ferns. "Where'll I sleep to-night?" he inquired mournfully.

"Why, we'll make you up a nice bed on the floor, dearest, with both mattresses and all the covers I brought from the house. It'll be just as comfortable; and we've got to hide that horrid old bunk."

"Whose jail is this, anyhow?" asked Lewis of me, being very careful, however, to keep his voice down. "You're one of my stern jailors now, unk. Tell me, hasn't a poor prisoner any rights?"

"As a prisoner, yes, my boy; but as a bridegroom, no!" I said to him firmly. "Bridegrooms are only permitted to live at all on condition that they keep out of the way of their betters."

At last it was done, and we went home, flushed and tired, leaving Lewis to sleep on the floor.

"It's going to be just lovely!" said Dorothy. "I'll be awfully busy all morning, seeing to the wedding breakfast; we'll have to pack it all up and bring it to the jail in baskets. Peter, I want you to go after Mr. Duncan. No, you'd better do that, Uncle George; there will be some explaining to do."

I sighed resignedly. I could see myself explaining to the Reverend Percy Duncan that Miss McGregor's wedding was to be solemnized after all—in the village lockup, and that he was invited to officiate.

"You, Peter," our inexorable task-mistress went on, "will have to keep Lewis' flivver going; Rosina and I'll be back and forth with baskets and things. And, Doctor Somers, you go down first thing and

stay with Lewis; see that he doesn't upset any of our decorations."

"I'll take care of him," replied Somers. "Yes," to Dorothy's mute, questioning gaze, "yes, I've got the ring and all that. Don't you worry. I've been best man before now."

"I—I wish I could come, too!" said Miss Christie wistfully. Aunt Mary, ostentatiously resigned, had retired for the night, and the nurse had joined us in the living room, which was not her usual custom. Her blond hair was coiled about a shapely head; she had discarded her unbecoming white uniform and wore a simple dress of some soft, clinging blue stuff —chiffon, I suppose. Her violet eyes were unwontedly bright; the bovine calm of her face had melted, so that she seemed almost animated.

Dorothy nudged me. "Look!" she whispered. "I told you!"

I knew what she meant. And, indeed, to-night Miss Christie was very near to being a beauty. "I wish I could go," she repeated softly, her big eyes on Doctor Somers.

"I wish you could," he answered sincerely.

Dorothy rose abruptly, tugged at my arm and beckoned to Peter, and dragged us both incontinently out of the room. "Go to bed, both of you!" she ordered. "There's a hard day ahead of you."

CHAPTER XVIII

SOMERS DISGRACES HIMSELF

DOROTHY'S prophecy was fulfilled. Wednesday dawned clear and hot, and we sweltered through a long forenoon, doing all those thousand last trifles which every wedding demands.

The news had run through all Pinelands; curious eyes followed our every movement, as we hurried through the streets, variously laden. I should have liked to hear the comment of some of the town's strait-laced matrons; but sentiment generally seemed much in our favor. The romance of this marriage had caught the fancy of our villagers. Many an eye beamed upon Dorothy as she raced back and forth in Lewis' flivver; many a man and woman stopped me, as I limped hurriedly by, to wish her good luck by proxy. I was glad that Doctor Gaskell's quiet funeral had been held yesterday, so that sight of his hearse need not mar Dorothy's joy.

A crowd gathered before the jail; it separated respectfully, as our few guests arrived, then closed again, craning curious necks. On my final trip I found Somers in the heart of the throng, hail-fellow-well-met with them all, passing rude jests back and forth. I fancied that I saw the glint of a black bottle circulating, but I could not be sure.

Then Dorothy came, a thin silk coat over her wedding finery, and we went in.

The ceremony went off excellently, I thought; the

more impressive and solemn for its unusual setting. Sheriff Redden, in an ancient double-breasted frock coat of voluminous skirts, gave the bride away, with an old-fashioned gallantry, which was very pleasing; Lewis looked handsome and manly enough, albeit a bit pale and nervous; and the bride was charming.

When they were safely married, a shyly importunate messenger from the crowd without begged them to show themselves. So the big door was swung back, and bride and groom stood for a moment on the jail steps, and a very striking couple they made.

Hearty cheers greeted them. There was nothing which could be resented in the town's spontaneous sympathy; these cheering folk without were honestly, whole-heartedly rejoicing in the happiness of our young people. They paid their tribute of sincere admiration to this daughter of Pinelands, who had had courage to stand up for her lover.

Dorothy turned back with moist eyes. "After all, they're my home folks, and I love them all—to-day!"

I, too, had warmed toward the town of my adoption; and, for some reason, it only convinced me further of its sincerity when I saw in the crowd Satterfield, Bates, and Conover, and a dozen others, who less than forty-eight hours ago had surrounded this very jail with intent to hang the man they were cheering now. I chose to believe that this, and not the sullen menace of that night, was their normal mood.

Still in her wedding finery, Dorothy, aided by her

two bridesmaids, fell to laying out the wedding breakfast on card tables; and an extraordinary fine breakfast it seemed to all of us, I think, and we did ample justice to it.

The crowd outside lessened, but did not entirely disperse. We heard a rumble of conversation, an occasional outbreak of laughter, and at last a vociferous cry:

"We—want—Somers!"

Renewed laugher. "Cut it out, fellers," urged some one. "Don't bust up th' party!"

More yells: "We—want—Somers! Hey, Shorty! Come on out, Splinter! Oh, you bean pole!"

Thus variously adjured, Doctor Somers unfolded his lean length. "I guess I'd better go," he said. Suddenly I observed that the bright eyes he turned upon us were suspiciously unsteady of focus. "I—I'm afraid it's partly my fault their hanging round this way. I'll persuade them to go away."

He turned toward the door, his long stork legs moving stiffly, as if he preserved his equilibrium by an effort. I wondered whether Somers had been drinking, then abused myself for the disloyal thought. Just inside the door he paused and pinned his deputy-sheriff's star to the left breast of his immaculate morning coat. The effect was unusual in the extreme, but he seemed wholly satisfied therewith.

Then he bowed profoundly, recovered himself with difficulty, and disappeared, leaving poor Dorothy to look after him in accusing wonder.

"Why Lewis, what makes him act so queer?" she demanded.

Renewed clamor without. "Yeay, Splinter! Hooray, Somers! Atta boy—let's go!" The raucous voice of Ralph Satterfield predominated.

"Your friend Somers seems to be—ah—popular," I remarked grimly to my nephew.

Lewis flushed. "Oh, he's all right, unk," he replied. "Let him alone; he knows what he's doing."

No doubt he did; and, remembering all that he had already accomplished, I could not blame him much. Yet—— "He's awfully thick with Satterfield and that bunch," I said. "And he's been drinking this morning, or I miss my guess. Does he—is he taken this way often?"

"Nonsense, unk! Somers is no drunkard, if that's what you're getting at. He's an odd sort; I told you that. He's got some scheme on hand, that's all."

"Some scheme with that low-down bootlegger!" I replied. "With the very crowd that wanted to hang you the other night! Humph! I don't admire his choice of friends."

Our festivities went on; but some way the zest of them had departed. The Reverend Mr. Duncan felt called upon to make a little speech, extolling Dorothy's heroic sacrifices for the man she loved, gushing about my conduct Monday night—though it was little enough I did to protect Lewis—and generally making himself oratorically obnoxious, and the rest of us uncomfortable. Then the bridesmaids must weep over Dorothy, as bridesmaids, I suppose, have wept over brides since the first wedding day in history; and Dorothy cried a little, too, because they cried; and Peter and I wrung Lewis' hand and

choked—and I, for one, was considerably relieved when the Reverend Mr. Duncan kissed the bride once more and departed, leaving us his blessing.

Then the bridesmaids went, too, and our handful of guests. Peter and I were alone with the happy couple. Dorothy cried again because she must leave her husband and go back to Fort House; and Peter stood amazingly erect and blew his nose sonorously; and Lewis looked lonely and tired and miserable; and I could have cried myself without making the slightest effort.

At last Dorothy concealed her finery under a coat and went out to the flivver, her little nose pink with weeping. And Peter and I followed, after locking the bridegroom into his cell once more. Poor Lewis. It must have been lonely enough there, locked in with only the drooping flowers of the wedding decorations to keep him company.

We drove silently back to Fort House, and Dorothy went upstairs to change, while Peter and I thankfully shed our formal clothes, and came downstairs in soft shirts and linen trousers.

Dorothy remained invisible; but we two sat on the porch, through a long, hot afternoon, waiting for a best man who failed to appear. Supper time came and passed. We ate in silence, except for Aunt Mary's resigned monologue. Miss Christie wore another dress; pale pink this time, with a low, square neck, which displayed her round, dimpled throat. She looked very nice, I thought; it was really marvelous how she had changed and brightened in

two days. She said almost nothing; but her big blue eyes kept turning toward the door.

That was an unpleasant meal. Dorothy kept her reddened eyes upon her plate; Peter was grumpy; the omelet was scorched, and Rosina was defiantly, ostentatiously conscious of our lack of appetite. She flounced in and out, and set down the dishes with a bang. Every movement said: "Well, cain't have parties every meal. I done cooked one spread to-day!"

We finished, and Aunt Mary, still prophesying evil and acidly gratified by our evident disheartenment, had herself wheeled back to her own room. "I might as well go to bed and read there," she announced. "It does seem, after being left alone all day, that I might find somebody to exchange a civil word with me. But there! I'm used to being ignored."

Miss Christie put her to bed and presently came out to where we sat forlornly on the front porch. And still no Somers.

"Whatever can be the matter?" asked Dorothy anxiously. "Do you suppose he's hurt?"

I thought the nurse's color faded; her big eyes grew bigger. "Oh, I hope not!"

"Humph!" said I sourly. "Drunk, more likely."

"Why, Uncle George *Uhlman!* That's horrid! It's not like you. Of course he's not drunk."

I sighed. "Well, Dorothy, I hope not. But—there he comes now!" I rose and pointed.

There he came, sure enough, up the street toward us, still in his braided morning coat, a wilted flower in his button hole, and that ridiculous police badge

pinned on his narrow chest. His silk hat was cocked to one side of his head, and he held his head canted far to the other side, as if to balance it. His long legs wabbled grotesquely; he advanced in erratic jerks, tacking from tree to tree, and, as he came closer, we could hear him sing, not unmusically: "An' 'twas from ole Satterfield's bootleg party, I was takin' th' ole doc home!"

"Oh, dear!" said Dorothy helplessly. "What shall we do?"

Somers advanced to the foot of the steps and paused there, weaving back and forth on wide-set legs, like a pair of intoxicated dividers. "How do, f-folks?" He was gravely polite and tried to bow. Then he knocked off his silk hat, stumbled, and stepped fair upon its crown.

"Dear me, dear me!" he mumbled. "S-shockin'! Shockin' spectacle, horrid sight! Young p'fesshun'l man, brightes' prospec's, ever'thing fine, an' all gone t' pot account of th' demon drink!" He laughed wildly, then collected himself by a tremendous effort.

"I am very sorry, Mrs. Parker." Dorothy started at the sound of her new name. "I apologize profoundly." For a moment his enunciation was elaborately exact; he spoke with drunkenly deliberate care. "Not my fault entirely; due to un-for-tun-ate mis-cal-cul-a-tion ca-pa-ci-ty."

Poor Dorothy rose, her face deadly white with disgust, and swept into the house. Somers looked after her ruefully.

"Sorry," he repeated. "Here, Pete—unk—good f-fellows! H-help me in; get sobered. Got n-news."

I hesitated, angry and ashamed; Peter rose obediently. But Miss Christie was before us both. She ran down the steps and caught the drunken man's arm.

"I'll steady you, doctor. That's right! Now the other foot. Are you coming, you two, or will you sit up there and stare like two old prudes? I'm ashamed of you," she declared, and her angry face once more shone with that vivid beauty, which emotion alone seemed able to bring to it. "Come!" She stamped her foot. "That's right, doctor; just one more step now. Come! Not two days ago this man saved your nephew's life, Mr. George Uhlman; he saved the life of your sister's husband, young man! Oh, you make me sick! J-just because he's—he's overtaken like this!"

We hurried to her aid, I, at least, a trifle ashamed of myself. For Doctor Somers had been invaluable, whatever his personal habits might be. We helped him in and upstairs to his room, ordered about unmercifuly by the erstwhile sleepy and indifferent Miss Christie.

"G-good girl!" mumbled Somers. "She un'stan's, anyhow. Col' towels, please—an' basin. Goin' be s-sick."

And sick he was. Miss Christie attended him, quietly efficient, as if the handling of drunken men had been a large part of her training.

"More cold towels," she ordered. "Mr. McGregor, run down and get Rosina to make some coffee, very strong. Quick, now!"

We hurried to obey her. Somers sat all huddled

in a chair, his long legs limply outthrust. He groaned and pressed the wet towel close against his temples, fighting hard for self-possession. I saw the perspiration start out all over his lean, sallow face.

Presently he raised his head. His color was ghastly, greenish-white, but his eyes were clear and steady. I saw that he was completely sobered, and I marveled at the man's self-control.

"Oh, my!" he groaned. "What rotten, rotten booze! And how I did hate it!"

"You conquered your dislike, apparently," I said to him.

"Humph!" He stared at me whimsically, but there was a hurt look in his eyes. "Do you suppose I did this for the fun of it? Oh, well, I oughtn't to blame you."

"*I* didn't!" said the nurse serenely. "I knew why you did it." Peter returned, bearing coffee; and the sick man gulped it down, black and scalding.

"You knew?" Somers looked at the girl gratefully. I think there were tears in his eyes. "I'm pretty sick yet," he said. "Say, it does cut, to have you folks think that of me."

He rose unsteadily, leaning on Miss Christie's arm. "Good girl!" he repeated, with that sudden, flashing smile. "Well, I'm Ralph Satterfield's very best friend now, and, oh, what a head it's cost me! That man's a tank; he's copper-lined." He passed a hand across his forehead with a whimsical smile. "But I've learned a lot. I can give a pretty good guess as to Satterfield's whereabouts at the time Gaskell was shot!"

CHAPTER XIX

AN EXPLANATION

SOMERS groaned, rubbed his aching head, and drank another cup of black coffee. He was collecting himself momently; save for a very pale face he was once more the coolly casual, brusquely friendly chap we all knew.

"Not later than nine, is it?" he inquired. "Right! Let's go downstairs. Call Dorothy; I've got lots to tell you all, and I'd better make my peace with her at once." He made a wry face. "She doesn't exactly admire me right now, I'll bet!"

So we all repaired to the big sitting room, and presently Dorothy appeared, urged in by her brother, and still looking hurt and disgusted. Somers rose.

"Let me apologize, Mrs. Parker," he began. "No —I'm perfectly sober now!" He smiled his warming, whimsical smile as she made a little movement of distaste. "Just let me explain. I had reason to think that this man Satterfield knew more about the murder than he'd told. You knew that? Well, the only way to find out was to make friends with him. If I could get his confidence, he might let something out inadvertently. So I had to chum up with him and his crowd; I had to drink with them, though I assure you it wasn't an unmixed pleasure, by any means. Lordy, that raw corn whisky!" He rubbed his head again ruefully. "I thought I could

drink with that bunch and keep my head; but I was mistaken."

"Oh, I suppose it was all right," replied Dorothy, only half mollified. "But it was just awful, doctor, to think of you off somewhere, drinking with the very man who was going to hang my—my husband, two days ago!"

"That's just why I did it! Satterfield hadn't any love for Doctor Gaskell, and it seemed odd to me that he should be so bitter against Lewis—unless he thought he'd be safer himself if somebody else was hung for that shooting. But wait till I tell you.

"In the first place, Satterfield was out drinking and playing poker that night, and somebody phoned him about four in the morning, and he went out. I told you all that, and that there was a shotgun beside Tulliver's door? Yes. Well, Satterfield took that gun with him! That's one thing I learned by getting drunk, Mrs. Parker." I noticed that he had dropped the familiar "Dorothy;" perhaps Somers resented the girl's attitude just the least bit in the world.

"Well," he went on, "Charlie Bates went out back to the pump for a drink, and he noticed that the shotgun was gone. And, when they all left, after Satterfield got back, the gun stood in its place again. And that's that!"

"Look here, Somers," I cut in. "Satterfield went out at four, you say? Are you sure that was after Gaskell got the sick call?"

Somers nodded. "I asked Olsen about that. He called Gaskell up about ten minutes before four.

He thought it was queer he didn't come, and finally he got dressed and came after him about six. That's how he happened to be there so soon after Gaskell's body was found."

"Well," I continued triumphantly, "if Gaskell was sent for at ten minutes of four, he must have started across lots toward Olsen's place pretty soon after four o'clock. And he never got to Olsen's, so he must have been shot on the way over. That would fix the killing at four, or very soon after; and my nephew couldn't have done it, because he didn't get there until five. That's easy to prove, because I saw him, and both Wakefield and I heard the shot. Doesn't that clear Lewis?"

Somers nodded impatiently. "If we could prove it—yes. Don't you suppose I'd thought of that, long ago? But we can't. Gaskell was alone in the house; his wife was away, and the cook didn't get there until seven. He was sent for at three-fifty, all right, but who's going to prove he didn't take an hour to get ready? Nobody saw him except the murderer, and we can hardly expect *him* to come forward and testify. Now let me get back to it; where was I?

"Oh, yes! Satterfield's daughter, Minnie, is your night telephone operator. She's a nice girl, too; I made her acquaintance to-day. And it was Minnie who called him up at four in the morning; he let that out to me, talking about the affair. I'm pretty good, you know; I have to admit it. I pumped a tremendous lot out of Satterfield and his gang, and I don't believe one of them suspected what I was after. Satterfield is pretty bitter against Gaskell,

even now that he's dead. He more than hinted that the docor knew more than was good for him; and he said one rather odd thing about that, too. 'If Doc Parker hadn't killed Gaskell,' he said, 'that is, if he did kill him—why, somebody else would have done it in a day or two. Gaskell was buttin' into what wasn't none of his put-in.' What do you think of that?"

We all stirred excitedly; Dorothy glowed at him. "Why, that's just wonderful! It was as good as saying he did it himself. Now you can clear my —my h-husband"—faltering a bit on the unfamiliar word—"as easy as anything!"

That was like Dorothy. She was mercurial; by turns exalted, and again in despair; inclined to jump at conclusions, and, by reason of that failing, unjust at times. I felt she had been unfair to Somers tonight. But it was an impulsive, generous injustice, for which she hastened to make amends.

"Will you forgive me, F-Floyd?" she asked prettily. "I know it was horrid of me, but I'm so upset!"

He gave her that sudden, flashing smile. "Why, of course, Dorothy! I don't blame you one bit. But it's not so easy as all that, either. We're gradually collecting information, which may help the defense somewhat, but we can't prove anything from what Satterfield admits when he's drunk, you know. This only gives us a start for further investigation along those lines."

He reflected a moment, his long, dark face grave and mature; looking at him I could scarcely realize

that this man, one short hour ago, had staggered up to Fort House, uproariously drunk, and had put a foot through his silk hat on the steps.

"There's something back of it all," he went on presently. "I'm beginning to feel that this murder is more complicated than we had thought. Satterfield knows something, I'm sure, whether he did the actual shooting or not. But, if he did, I don't think it was merely revenge for being sent up for thirty days. A month in jail isn't any terrible disgrace to a chap like that; he's been in jail before, I'm told. No, there is something else, something bigger, behind it all; what, I don't know. It's irritating because it's so vague. For example, Satterfield was quite apologetic about that mob. We laughed a lot to-day about his lynching that didn't come off; my back's sore from being pounded. Well, he hadn't anything against Doctor Parker, he told me—not a thing. Rather grateful to him than otherwise, because Gaskell was due to die anyhow. But he had to stir up the mob, just the same. 'Couldn't git outa that,' he told me. 'Things bein' as they were, w'y, I just hadda start somepin that a way. So I passed round some white liquor I had. Have 'nother drink, doc! Lots more where that come f'om. I give th' boys s'm' corn liquor and talked it up, and I got 'em all goin' till they was jus' wild and r'arin' to lynch 'im. I just hadda do it, doc!' Now that was a queer way to put it, I thought. Why did he have to start a lynching bee? And who put him up to it? For, from the way he talked, I'm quite sure it wasn't his own plan. I'm as sure as I can be that he stirred

up that mob because somebody else, somebody in the background, somebody we know nothing about—yet, ordered him to do it. Or, at least, because he thought the lynching would please this mysterious somebody."

Somers sighed and rubbed his head, which ached furiously, no doubt. "It's all so confoundedly vague," he went on, scowling around at our blank faces. "Can't you think of something, any of you? Miss Christie, what's your idea? Hello! What's become of her?"

We all turned, but the couch was vacant. Some time during our talk, while we were all absorbed in Somers' narrative, perhaps, the nurse had slipped unobtrusively out.

"She's gone to bed, I suppose," said Dorothy. "You know, she's an awful sleepyhead."

Somers nodded. "Just wait till she begins to get the effect of those tablets," he declared confidently. "She won't be then. She was mighty good to help me out, a little while ago, and I was beastly drunk, too." He rose and stretched his long, emaciated arms above his head, groaning. "I'll go to bed, too. I'm about done up. But I'm going on with this thing; I'm going to find out what's behind it all, what mysterious person planned Gaskell's death. For I'm sure his death was planned and ordered. Satterfield thinks so, anyhow. And I'll have it out of him yet; I'll find out all he knows, even if I have to get drunk on his moonshine seven nights in the week!"

He paused, fingering his chin, and looked half humorously, half apprehensively, at the new Mrs. C.

Lewis Parker. "I forgot," he drawled. "After all I'm here, officially, only as Parker's best man. Now the wedding's over I ought to be going. Besides, it'll be unpleasant for you, to say the least, if I have to come back half-seas-over every night. I'll go to the hotel, or perhaps Uncle George will let me bach in with him for a while?"

But Dorothy would have none of that. "You're being mean," she declared, "and you needn't be horrid, just because I was. You'll stay right here at Fort House, both of you! We've got lots of room, and I don't care what Aunt Mary says, either! I'm a married woman now; and, besides, Peter's here; and I guess I can have company if I want to! And I'll be so l-lonesome until Lewis comes back, and s-scared, too, with that nasty Poltergeist, and thinking of Doctor Gaskell killed right under my windows, almost, and—and everything!" She dabbed at her eyes, and patted her brother's hand, as he murmured something. "Oh, you're good, Peter, dear, and it's a comfort to have you, but Floyd would be just miserable over there, with nobody but an old colored woman to look after him. You'll stay here, won't you, Floyd, and you, Uncle George?"

We promised, of course; who would not?

CHAPTER XX

A FLIRTATION

NEXT morning Doctor Somers rose early. I heard him splashing in the bathroom, slapping his razor against its strop, whistling louder and shriller than the ubiquitous quail outside. I was fagged out and irritable; his cheerfulness annoyed me. A man who had been drunk last night should be more subdued, I thought.

I pounded on the bathroom door. "Shut up, man!" I called. "You're worse than the bobwhites!"

I heard a chuckle from within. "'Smatter, unk? Get up on the wrong side? Cheer-i-o, old thing! So you prefer the birds, do you?"

And straightway he fell to imitating the shrill call of the quail: "Bob*white!* Bob*white!*"

I grinned helplessly. What could be done with such a man? "Better cut that out," I warned him. "You'll catch it at breakfast, if Aunt Mary hears you."

That silenced him. Presently he emerged, shaved to a miracle, the heavy beard showing blue beneath his dark skin. "Aren't I pretty, unk? Going out in society to-day!"

He came down to breakfast in a gorgeous pongee silk suit, whose fitted coat and tight, creased trousers made him more incredibly thin and angular than usual. He bowed grotesquely, struck an attitude,

knuckles on hip, looking rather like those tiny figures of some cartoonist, whose bodies are made of one straight line; he was almost as thin as that. The slender Malacca cane, which he brandished, seemed as thick as his long legs.

"Uncle George, I want the flivver to-day," he announced. "I'm going for a drive with my best girl."

"Humph!" said I. "Is she blind?"

"Not yet, but this rig may put her eye out."

"Very likely," I told him grimly. "All right; take the car."

"Who's going with you?" asked Dorothy curiously.

Aunt Mary had not appeared; she was taking breakfast in bed, it seemed. But the nurse was there, quiet and unobtrusive as always, eyes on her plate. At our hostess' question I fancied that the color rose in her cheeks.

"Miss Minnie Satterfield," said Somers. "She works at night, unfortunately; but she's going to get up early this morning, and we're driving to Jackson Springs for lunch."

He ate hurriedly and pushed back his chair. "Excuse me? I've got a lot of running round to do; I want to drop in and see Parker, too. It would never do to keep Miss Satterfield waiting. She's a very pretty girl."

Somers disappeared, and Dorothy looked at me askance. "He doesn't seem exactly reluctant," she murmured. "Oh, I know, Uncle George, he's doing it to help Lewis, but it does seem as if he could go about it some other way than getting drunk at night and chasing round with pretty girls

all day. I keep thinking of my poor husband, locked up alone in that horrid j-jail, and Doctor Somers enjoying himself like this! You needn't tell *me* that he hated so to get drunk," she went on stubbornly. "And now it's that Minnie Satterfield! You've seen her, Peter? She's just awfully pretty, and you know what her father is!"

My nephew's bride was rather uncharitably inclined. "My dear," I told her mildly, "that's not the poor girl's fault."

Miss Christie rose abruptly and pushed back her chair. "I—I must see to Miss McGregor," she murmured. Her plump face was scarlet, her big eyes flamed.

We saw no more of Doctor Somers that day. The time went slowly enough. Dorothy and I visited my nephew. The wedding decorations had all been taken down, but the young lady's housewifely eye detected dried leaves and petals in a corner, and straightway she dispatched me after a broom and dustpan.

"If my very own husband's *got* to live in this miserable old jail, I'm going to keep it clean for him, at least!" she announced.

I brought the required implements, and Dorothy fell to work in a cloud of dust. "A fine sort of jailer, that man Wakefield," she declared. "The place hasn't been swept out in months!"

While she bustled about, setting things to rights with the prideful, loving care of the new-made housewife, Lewis watched her slim form with wistful eyes. Poor boy! Already his confinement was telling on him. His face was pale and worn, and he seemed

thinner, older, more conscious of his responsibilities. I fancied that, if he were free, my nephew's hot temper would be under better control. This experience, however bitterly bought, was maturing him fast.

I sat back, watching this pitiful bride and groom; and the girl's happy activity, her housewifely care, the whole pathetic travesty of a honeymoon, brought tears to my old eyes. I rose abruptly.

"This dust is too much for me." Then I blew my nose. "I'll sit on the steps a while, children, till you get through."

On the steps I sat and glowered down at the absurd deputy-sheriff's star which I wore. I have no doubt that I was the unhappiest jailer who was ever forced to sunder loving hearts.

Aunt Mary appeared at luncheon in an unusually subdued, amiable mood. Indeed the old lady seemed much changed of late; the cloud of trouble, which had settled over Fort House had left its mark upon her, also. At times she was more querulous, more irritable and exacting, than I had ever seen her; and again she was kinder, more thoughtful of others. In the midst of her sharpest mood she would soften suddenly and be so kindly, so pathetically sweet, that one could not but pity her and forgive her the stabs which she inflicted upon us all. Her face had changed subtly, grown thinner, more sharply lined. Its former expression of sweetly pathetic resignation, which I had grown to believe, uncharitably, was assumed for the provoking of sympathy, was in evidence less often. Now her softly faded countenance wore a look of honest pain, of mental anguish, not

unmixed with human resentment. And I, for one, fancied it much more than the old expression of strained, angelic sweetness.

To-day she merely played with her food; though, as a rule, even when she suffered most from the "knots in her neck," her appetite was not visibly affected. She said nothing; and, when Dorothy spoke sadly of Lewis' lonely meal in the lockup, she burst quite suddenly into broken weeping and had to be wheeled back to her room.

Dorothy looked at me, then at Peter, almost with awe. "Why," she exclaimed, "auntie is really upset! She's really thinking about somebody else for once. Oh, Peter, we must be kinder to her."

And she was, I think, even more thoughtful of her aunt than usual, all through that long, weary week, though to my mind she had never failed in forbearance. It was a long week, that one! A tedious, dreary time, that taxed the patience of us all. Lewis grew somber, depressed, almost morose. He could see nothing before him but darkness: the meeting time of the grand jury came closer and closer, and he would not be convinced but that they would bring in a true bill against him.

"That district attorney, solicitor, as they call him down here, that man Vanbrugh will see to *that*," he predicted gloomily. "There's no possible chance that they won't indict me; we might as well make up our minds to that."

At once Dorothy would strive to comfort and encourage him; and then she would break down and

cry on his shoulder and beg him indignantly to send for a lawyer, to hire detectives—anything!

"Because, dearest, that Doctor Somers isn't doing one thing to help us—not a single thing! He's just out riding round all day with that Satterfield girl, the bold, hard thing! And in your flivver, too! And out till all hours, every night, and coming in drunk, and everything like that. He's a fine friend, I must say!"

Lewis and Peter and I would try to soothe her, pointing out all Somers had done, reminding her that even this intimacy was carried on in the hope of extracting further information from Ralph Satterfield. But Dorothy would shake a stubborn head.

"You needn't tell *me* he's doing it all for Lewis! It's just because he *likes* to get drunk and chase over the country with that—that *thing!* So there!" A mercurial young person was Dorothy, as I have said, prone to injustice at times. But she was not too much to blame, perhaps; it was a terrible situation for any bride.

And Somers' conduct rather worried me, also. Day after day he rose late, flattered and cajoled Rosina into preparing him an extra breakfast, climbed into Lewis' flivver and disappeared. Sometimes he would be back for lunch or dinner—often late—and again he would not return until midnight or later. Then he would stumble in, half drunk. He never returned again in the condition which had disgraced Dorothy's wedding day; he was always able to navigate after a fashion, and he made no great disturb-

ance getting to his room. But every night he had been drinking; that was not hard to know.

Once or twice Peter and I waited up for him; then we gave up in disgust. Curiously it was Miss Christie, the somnolent nurse, who used to doze the evenings through on the couch, it was this girl who never failed to sit up against Somers' erratic appearances. "Go to bed if you like," she would say, "I'll wait. He—he might need somebody. And I remember, if the rest of you don't, that he's doing this for *you!*"

Miss Christie, too, had altered greatly. I saw the change in her from day to day. Whether it was Doctor Somers' pills or some more subtle medicament, she grew more vivid, more alive. Her bovine calm altered; she yawned no more; life seemed to have taken on newer, fresher colors to her. No longer did she doze the evenings away; and in the mornings she appeared at breakfast as fresh and alert as Dorothy, not dull and somnolent, as a fortnight ago. She lost flesh; her overplump figure grew willowy. Her round face changed, and with the passing of its superfluous flesh grew shapelier. It was as though some delicate, spiritual chisel were at work, carving new planes of beauty, bringing out clearly the rare loveliness her moments of deep feeling had hitherto promised.

I rhapsodize, no doubt, and rhapsodies are out of place, coming from a battered, disillusioned old rheumatic. But I cannot exaggerate the change wrought in Anne Christie. Even in that time of deep discouragement the miracle impressed me. She

was no longer stolid, unresponsive; a new mobility curved her lips, a new light shone in her violet eyes; a new animation imbued her fair face, as her expression changed constantly with each nuance of thought, and her delicate color ebbed and flowed charmingly.

"I'll wait up for the doctor!" she insisted. "He's doing this for you, but look at what he's done for *me* . I feel so much better in every way; it's wonderful! And I'm grateful, if you-all aren't!"

And so the time passed until the meeting of the Carabas County grand jury for July was only one day off; and still nothing more was done for Lewis. It was settled that his case should be considered first; and I could see nothing ahead of him but an indictment.

That evening Doctor Somers appeared in time for supper; and, for once, he was cold sober. He left the flivver at the curb, climbed the broad steps wearily and entered the big sitting room, where I sat with Dorothy and Peter.

"Oh, lordy!" he groaned, thrusting his long, lean legs straight out before him. "I'm done up. But it's over now, thank goodness!"

He did look tired. His sallow face was almost colorless; his thin cheeks were hollower than ever, and his eyes were sunk deep into their sockets. Even his arms and legs seemed thinner, if that were possible. Miss Christie came in, her color a trifle higher than usual. Her eyes brightened at sight of Somers, I thought, and I wondered if she had heard him enter. The doctor looked her over critically.

"You're improving," he drawled, with impersonal approval. "I knew thyroid was what you needed."

The girl stood silent, eyes downcast, her cheeks pink.

"Well," continued Somers, and paused to yawn. "It's over now. If we ought to get a bit of action to-morrow, as I hope, I shan't have to drink any more of Satterfield's beastly liquor. You know"—with one of those sudden changes of subject so characteristic of him—"they put chewing tobacco into this moonshine down here—and concentrated lye, to give it a bead. Bah! And I'm through with Minnie, too—shan't have to listen to her giggle any more atall!"

He looked vastly relieved at the prospect; and so, I thought, did Miss Christie.

"But," protested Dorothy maliciously, "that's not quite kind, is it? Here you've been making love to that girl for a week and more; you've engaged her young affections, and now you're going to jilt her!"

"Yes," declared Somers, in his characteristic drawl, half whimsically, half bitterly, "I'm a fine figure of a lover, ain't I? Handsome, robust, and muscular!" His eyes traveled down over the lank, skinny length of him. "I'm a handsome devil, what?"

"You are *so!*" exclaimed Anne Christie. Then she bit her lip, and a hot flush dyed her face to the very roots of her fair hair.

"But you may set your mind at rest, Mrs. Parker," Somers went on, mercifully ignoring Anne's confusion. "It's me that's jilted, not the fair Minnie. A burly person, named Conover, has cut me out. You see, he owns a real car, and I only had a bor-

rowed flivver. Minnie won't miss me. And I've found out what I wanted to—all I hoped to, at any rate. Peter, do you want to go out scouting with me to-morrow?"

"It's about time something was done!" exclaimed Dorothy. "The grand jury meets to-morrow!"

CHAPTER XXI

AN ILLICIT ENTERPRISE

NEXT morning, very early indeed, we three men set out in Lewis' faithful little car, for I refused to be left behind.

"Maybe I am old," I protested, "and I know I'm rheumatic; but I can keep up with you fellows yet. I'm just as much interested in getting Lewis out of jail as you possibly can be."

Somers accepted my company rather ungraciously, commandeered the field glasses, which Peter had brought back from France, and his army automatic. "For," he explained, "we might have trouble."

He drove the panting flivver up the hill behind Fort House, then along the main road toward Hokesville, ten miles away. Two miles outside the village he turned abruptly to the left, into one of the innumerable sandy tracks, which wound away through the stumps and scrub oaks on either side. This country was all lumbered over, thirty years ago; for miles our roads run through a bleak desert of oak saplings and dwarf pines, too small even for firewood, with here and there a tall, lone, half-dead pine tree, whose trunk bears the old scars of the turpentiners, mourning the vanished forest, dying of loneliness for its mates, who have long since been changed into houses and mine timbers and the spars of ships.

It is a desolate country, which has been burned over and reburned, until no grass will grow, and the pale sand lies naked and arid between the scrub oaks and dwarf pines, or stretches for acres, black and forbidding, with the ash of recent fires, which rises in choking clouds at every step. Through it the main roads wind as through a wilderness, though in the sand hills one finds the best land for peaches, tobacco, or cotton, which our State affords. But the roads run over the hills, and the arable land lies in bottoms, perhaps a quarter of a mile away. The farmhouses are there, too, quite out of sight from the roads. To reach them one must turn into a narrow, sandy track, such as ran on before us now, winding between blackened stumps; a track indistinguishable to the stranger from the dozens of tote roads made by long gone lumbermen, which lead nowhere. It is a difficult country for the motorist with engine trouble.

The road we followed brought us to no farmhouse. It wound on and on among pine stumps and scrub oaks, swerving to dodge rotten logs here and there, leading us through unexpected patches of vivid bloom, through burnt-over areas, where the dust rose blindingly. At last it dipped into a hollow, where tall pines still grew, untouched by the ax, and ran across a creek—a "branch," they call them here—through which the flivver splashed vigorously and stopped abruptly on the rise of the hill beyond.

Somers snapped off the ignition and clambered out. "Come on," he said; "we walk from here."

He led the way up a steep, sandy slope, which

gave treacherously beneath our feet. Burrs clung to my trousers, and I clutched at brambles and tore my hands. Then we came suddenly and simultaneously to the top of the hill and the edge of the pine grove. Before us was a thin screen of bushes and scrub oaks, and beyond that a wide, bare, rolling plain. Below us was a small cornfield; and a quarter of a mile away I saw the dark green of tobacco; but, for the most part, the ground was fallow, covered thinly with bunch grass, already turning yellow in the July sun.

Near the tobacco field was a small, bare, log structure, its interstices well plastered, a brick fireplace opening outward upon its hither side, a drying house for tobacco, such as are scattered all over this State. Save for that the plain was empty; it held no human habitation, nor any sign of man.

"Humph!" said I. "What are we going to do here?"

Somers grinned. "Looks innocent enough, doesn't it? A tobacco field and a drying house; some cotton"—he pointed to a field beyond the tobacco, which I had not noticed—"and a little of last year's crop piled under a shed. Bad year for cotton, you know; farmers are holding that in hopes of another forty-cent market. But just you wait and watch!"

Even as he spoke I saw a team of mules emerge from the pines beyond the clearing. They drew a creaking wagon loaded with something bulky; at that distance I could not make out what it was.

Somers focused Peter's field glasses. "One, two, five bales," he counted. "There's money on that

wagon, unk! What? Bales of cotton, that's what they are. But you watch!"

The wagon creaked slowly on; it seemed to crawl. I waited impatiently for what seemed an hour, but was really fifteen minutes, I suppose. Then the mules reached the drying house and stopped. I heard very faintly that queer, crooning whistle our teamsters use instead of the Northern "Whoa!"

The door of the log hut opened; two men emerged. "Who are they, man?" I asked eagerly. "Here, give me the glass!"

"Wait!" ordered Somers. "Ralph Satterfield and Charlie Bates. I don't know the man on the wagon —some old chap with a long beard. Now they're beginning—now look!"

He thrust the glasses into my hands, and I focused them with trembling fingers. Then the distant scene leaped into my eyes—the log house, the mules, the men, almost lifesize. They had unloaded the wagon and were cutting the wires, tearing the bales of cotton apart!

"What on earth?" I asked in a whisper. They seemed so close that I feared they would hear me. "What are they doing? Ah-h!"

I could see now. The loose cotton of the first bale fell away, revealing the rounded outlines of a keg—no, a full-sized barrel. "Is—is it——"

Somers nodded grimly. "It is! Whisky, a barrel in each bale. Worth two thousand dollars a barrel at bootleg prices. They're doing this by wholesale, unk! Pinelands could never consume all that booze.

They must be shipping it North. I wonder, now, how they camouflage it on the next lap?"

Peter reached impatiently after the glasses, but I put him back. "Wait, just one minute, boy. I want to see."

The back of that huge, booted stranger, who had driven the wagon, seemed oddly familiar. Satterfield and Bates I recognized readily enough; they faced me. But this other? I felt that I must know him, too; if he would only turn!

"Ah-h-h!" I sighed. "I know him, too! Here, Peter." I thrust the field glasses at him and turned to Somers. "Man, I know that big fellow with the whiskers! That's Lafe Rutledge—Roaring Lafe, he calls himself. And the last time I saw him, the only time I ever saw him, was on Doctor Gaskell's front porch, the day before the murder. He was shouting at the maid that Gaskell had until sun-up to settle with him!"

"Humph!" said Doctor Somers. Then he drew us back, and we retreated cautiously through the pines and down the long slope to where the flivver stood. Here our leader stopped.

"You both got a good look?" he asked. "You could swear to all three of those men?"

We nodded. "But of course we don't *know* there was whisky in those barrels," objected Peter. "We couldn't swear to that."

Somers chuckled. "You needn't, old son. I'm no prohibition agent, you know, but we've got to convince Satterfield that we've got this on him. Uncle

George there would be a bad liar, I'm afraid. No doubt you'd do better at it."

Peter bowed in mock acknowledgment of this dubious compliment. "But what are you after?" he asked. "Let's get it straight, so we can back you up; the virtuous Mr. Uhlman to the limits of fact, and me all the rest of the way."

"I'm as good a liar as either of you boys!" I protested, somewhat hurt, and they both laughed uproariously.

"Here it is, then," said Somers more seriously. "By hanging around Minnie Satterfield and drinking with her father I've learned a lot about this business. They're handling corn whisky, moonshine, by wholesale. It's made up in the mountains and brought down here once or twice a week, sometimes by truck and sometimes, like to-day, on a lumber wagon. It's only about forty miles, you know. They make the trip a different way every time, and a different man drives, so nobody'll notice. The whisky comes in barrels, hidden in a fake cotton bale, or in kegs put up in grocery boxes, like canned goods. They notify Satterfield by phone, at night; makes it awfully handy to have Minnie as operator, you see; saves a leak at this end. And Satterfield meets them out here. I had a time locating this place and finding a way to get out here without being seen. Then I wasn't sure but the booze would come out that road we took, and they'd find the flivver; in which case, Peter, your pistol might have been useful.

"Well, they repack the liquor here; I don't know

how. Bates hauls it down to Pinelands, or over to Hokesville, along with his peach crop—he has an orchard over beyond the clearing—and ships it North. Oh, it's a flourishing business which they do!

"And here's my scheme. If Satterfield didn't kill Gaskell himself, and I'm beginning to doubt that—I got pretty intimate with him, you know—if he didn't do it, he knows who did, and why. Doctor Gaskell found something, I imagine; located this cache, perhaps, and the gang decided to wipe him out before he could squeal. Gaskell was a mighty decent chap, they say, not one to stand for bootlegging. I don't think Satterfield did the killing himself, but he knows something. Now to-night we'll corner him and call for a showdown. Then what we find out will depend on whether he's more afraid of being arrested for murder or of losing his job. And these mountaineer liquor runners are pretty tough characters, some of them. It's quite possible that he will take a chance of being tried for the shooting, rather than let the rest of his gang believe he's turned them up. Get me?"

"We do, old top!" declared Peter. "We sure do! Oh, boy, you've got a bean. We'll have this little old murder cleared up like winking, and Parker ready to take his wife into that little red-and-white bungalow as soon as they planned—even if this has been a pretty tough honeymoon for both of them."

CHAPTER XXII

THE SHOWDOWN

SOMERS clambered into the little car. "You crank her, Pete," he ordered languidly. "I'm the brains of this combination; you can be the brawn."

"Long-legged, lazy beggar!" retorted Peter. He stooped his five feet four in front of the hood, set his hundred and twenty pounds against its crank, and stopped to grin. "And the brains match the brawn," he jeered. "Both lightweights."

Somers' retort was lost in the roar of the motor. "Climb in, Peter!" he yelled. "Those chaps might hear us; it isn't more than half a mile. We want to be out of gunshot before they come barging over that hill!"

Turning the little car he bumped off at a round pace, splashing through the branch, bouncing and creaking over tree roots, and skidding through the loose sand. The pace he maintained was racking to my old bones, and I prayed for the springs of Lewis' flivver. But the bones and the springs held, by the especial grace of Heaven, though I heaved a deep sigh of relief when we swung at last into the clay road.

We got back to Fort House without mishap, and there Somers left us. "I'll drive around and leave word for Satterfield," he said. "He'll be busy out yonder for a while yet, but we ought to catch him

before evening. Where would be a good place for a quiet talk?"

"Why not at our house?" I asked. "We could have him in my nephew's office there. The place has been closed up since Lewis was arrested. There's nobody there."

"That'll be fine," replied Somers. "I'll leave word for Satterfield, and after lunch we can go over there and wait for him."

He rattled off in a cloud of dust and evil-smelling smoke, while Peter and I went into the house. It was almost noon; the morning had passed quickly enough. Somers returned in time for lunch.

"They expect him back about two," he reported. "I told them to send him over to your place, Uhlman, as soon as he comes in. I hinted at a little quiet game; that'll bring him, if anything."

"Show-down," declared Peter grimly.

We evaded Dorothy's eager questions as best we might; all three of us felt, I suppose, that it was best not to raise her hopes too high, for fear of the inevitable reaction, should our enterprise fail. She had been bubbling with optimism so often; and so often she had drooped again, disappointed and inclined to blame us for her disappointment. Directly after lunch we slipped out. Somers pacified his hostess by handing her the jail key, which he still kept much more constantly than did the constable.

"Here, child, I appoint you a deputy-deputy sheriff for this afternoon. Parker had his breakfast, and his lunch; I routed out Wakefield and saw to that. Now trot down there and keep him company for the

afternoon. If we're not back, you can see to his supper; picnic there with him, if you like. How's that?"

The poor child thanked him warmly, glowing at the thought of one single meal alone with her husband. It was pitiful.

I unlocked my house, which held already the queer, dank smell of disuse, and we three entered and disposed ourselves comfortably upon dusty chairs to await Satterfield's coming. He kept us long enough; he had not appeared at two, or at four. Indeed it was close upon sunset, and Dorothy, no doubt, was already arranging her pathetic supper party in the lockup, before we heard a heavy step on the porch, followed by his loud knock.

Somers went to the door. "Hello, Satterfield! Come right in this way."

"H-howdy, doc!" said Satterfield boisterously. His gruff voice was blurred with liquor. He slapped Somers' lean back and swaggered into the darkened room. "Howdy, gents! Aim t' have a li'l' game, huh? Have drink?"

Producing a quart flask he thrust it forward uncertainly, weaving back and forth upon booted feet. Then he perceived suddenly that we were not of his intimates.

"Wh-what's this here?" he demanded. "Thought you was gointa have s'm' reg'lar sports, doc?"

"I have," replied Somers equably. "Come in the office, Satterfield; we want to talk with you a bit." And, as the other lurched past him through the doorway, he passed a deft hand over both hips, then

slipped it under the loose coat with surprising speed and whipped out a big revolver.

The bootlegger whirled, snarling. "Here! Whaddaya mean?"

"Sit down, friend." Somers waved him amiably to a chair, using the pistol to gesture with. "We're going to have a nice, quiet talk, and I'd hate to have it interrupted by gun play."

Blinking at him uncertainly, Satterfield subsided. "You done drank a right smart o' my liquor," he said.

The doctor made a wry face. "Yes—for my sins! Now, Satterfield, we know all about your bootlegging business; where the liquor comes from, who makes it, how it's brought to Pinelands, and where it goes from here. We know you got five barrels of whisky this morning; it's in the old drying house, back of Bates' orchard, right now. We know all about it; we've got it all over you like a tent!"

Our victim scowled belligerently. "Huh! Dirty revenue sneak, are yuh? Spy! Revenuer!"

Somers grinned. "Not that," he said. "I'm no prohibition-enforcement agent. *I* don't care how much booze you peddle, though I do think it's a pretty bad job for any man, especially, considering the kind of stuff you're putting out! I don't want to squeal on you, Satterfield, and I shan't—unless——"

The other eyed him closely, tugging at his piratical mustache. "An' I thought you was my friend!" he said, apparently on the verge of maudlin tears.

"Well, gwan; how much? I c'n git a bunch o' money f'r ye, I s'pose."

Somers shook his head. "Not that, either. All I want is the truth about Doctor Gaskell's murder. Did *you* kill him, Satterfield?"

The man sat up suddenly, with a queer, galvanic jerk. Beneath its grizzled stubble, his face turned a pasty white; his fierce eyes roved uneasily, fear-filled, looking about for escape.

"I cain't!" he protested. "I cain't tell you-all nothin' 'bout it. Ain't healthy. Nossir!"

"Very well! I'll drop over to Raleigh to-morrow —no, to-night! I'll hunt up the collector of internal revenue there, and I'll tell him all about this wholesale booze business of yours. And, Satterfield," as the other shook a stubborn head, *"I'll say you told me about it!"*

At the threat, delivered with terrifying earnestness, Satterfield leaped up wildly. His truculence had disappeared; he was cold sober and in deadly fear.

"Ah, no, no, *no!"* he exclaimed, his face ghastly. He literally went down upon his knees, groveled on the floor, plucking at Somers' shoes with shaking hands. "Ah, don't! Don't, doc, he'll k-kill me shore—he'll cut my heart out—he'll b-burn me alive. You don't know 'im, doc—he'd skin me! Don't you, now! Ain't we been good frien's, an' drank together, an' all? Yuh wouldn't do that t' me? You-all ain't a-goin' to let him, will yuh?"

He turned to us, tears trickling down his cheeks, a revolting, pitiable spectacle.

"You'd better talk, then," said Somers inexorably.

"Oh, yeah—yeah! Anythin' on'y that! I'll give up anythin', if you-all won't turn 'im loose onto me."

"Get up!" ordered our leader disgustedly. "Sit over there and quit wallowing; act like a man."

Satterfield obeyed. "I ain't scared o' many things, doc," he said unresentfully, but with a certain rude dignity. "There's them could tell yuh I ain't no coward, but I am a-scared o' him! Whaddaya want?"

"Did you shoot Gaskell?"

"Nossir!" he replied emphatically.

"Did you see him shot?"

"Nossir!"

"Well," said Somers impatiently, "your daughter phoned to you that he was going out, about four that morning. You borrowed Tulliver's shotgun without asking for it, and you started off down the hill, meaning to kill him, didn't you?"

Satterfield stared in wonder tinged with admiration. "Was you there? Naw, yuh didn't come till next day. It beats my time how yuh found out, doc, but that's straight—all of it."

"Well, go on! What did happen? What did you do? Whom did you see? Come out with it all, or I'll go to Raleigh on the eight-ten!" Somers pulled his watch. "I've just nice time to catch it."

"Aw, now, doc, lissen! I come down th' hill with Tulliver's gun, jus' like yuh said, an' hung round Gaskell's house waitin' f'r him t' come out. But I never shot him, doc—I never seen him shot; I never seen him come outa th' house, even! I—I saw a—another feller hangin' round, an' I knew

it wa'n't healthy f'r me around there, an' I beat it. Honest, that's all!"

"Humph!" said Somers. "Who was it?"

But there Satterfield balked. He would say no more; nothing could move him to give the man's name, he protested. We would go to the collector; to the prohibition enforcement agents? Very well! That would be the death of *him,* but it would do us no good. "I tell yuh I'm a-scared o' this feller," he repeated. "I ain't a-goin' t' say nothin' *about* 'im—not one thing! He might as well kill me f'r squealin' about one thing as another, an' I ain't a-goin' t' squeal, neither! You-all c'n git me killed if yuh like, but I ain't done nothin' t' deserve it."

His final protest was not without its dignity. He was adamant; he admitted, white-faced and shaking, that a horrible death awaited him if it should be thought that he had betrayed his confederates in the illicit liquor traffic. None the less, he would tell us nothing.

"You seem as much frightened of this man you saw waiting for Gaskell as you do of the leader of your gang," declared Somers at last. Then he added a shrewd suggestion: "Perhaps they're the same man?"

Satterfield threw up his hands. "For law's sake, doc!" he exclaimed. "Naw—yes—naw! I don't know what t' say!" And he fell to weeping openly.

"Well, tell me this: Why did you plan to kill Gaskell?"

He looked up sullenly. "I had my orders. Th' feller knowed too much."

"It wasn't just because he sent you to jail, then?" asked Somers.

"Huh? That wa'n't s' much. I been in jail afore that."

"You had orders to shoot Gaskell, then. And, when you got down there, you found the man who gave you those orders, and you decided he was going to take the matter over himself. Is that right?"

Satterfield nodded reluctantly.

"Did the same man order you to lynch Parker?"

"We-ell, no, not exactly, but I figgered mebbe he'd like t' have it seed to."

"Exactly! So you think the chief of your bootlegging gang killed Doctor Gaskell? But you're afraid to admit it, even though we don't know the fellow."

Somers rose. The other, completely cowed, gazed at him in fear. "No," said Somers, with a grim laugh, "we shan't turn you up this time. But listen closely, Satterfield: You keep quiet! If you drop so much as a hint to this mysterious boss of yours, that you're so scared of, if you suggest to him that we're after him, Heaven help you! And now, get out!"

Satterfield rose with alacrity, half in doubt that he was to be let off so easily. "I won't say nothin'," he replied. "Ain't got to! You go monkeyin' round with *him,* an' that'll be th' last of yuh!"

He disappeared, and we locked up the place and started back toward Fort House.

At the corner, Peter turned. "I'll trot down after the mail," said he. "Be back in five minutes."

We found Dorothy and Miss Christie in the living room. Both looked up at us expectantly.

"Progress," said Somers. "I think we're on the trail of the murderer at last." And he told them briefly of to-day's work. As he finished, a thought struck me.

"Look here, Somers; remember that third man out there? I told you he was in town the night of the murder. He was over at Gaskell's, and he made some sort of a threat; you remember my telling you, Dorothy? A tremendous old man with a long, white beard, called himself 'Roaring Lafe' Rutledge? What if he were this mysterious leader of the whisky smugglers? He was in town, and he threatened Gaskell."

Somers did not reply. His eyes were on Anne Christie, who had grown very white. I had seen her flinch at the name of Rutledge, and now I recalled her strange conduct of that other night, when she had dashed from the house after hearing that name. What did she know of this thing?

"Are you sick?" asked Somers. "Miss Christie—Anne! What's the matter?"

Her lips opened, but Peter dashed in with a black face.

"Grand jury proceedings are out," he announced. "And they've indicted Lewis Parker for murder in the first degree!"

The news stunned us all, though we had been more or less prepared for it. Then, in the sudden silence which greeted this bombshell, Anne Christie spoke.

"I—perhaps I could help a little," she said.

CHAPTER XXIII

ANNE CHRISTIE'S STORY

WE all turned upon the nurse. Beneath our wondering gaze the bright color rose high, flooding her fair face; then receded once more, leaving her very pale. But she faced us bravely.

"I—I—— You see, I've hated so to talk about it all, even to think about it, and especially this last two weeks." She spoke to all of us, but her big violet eyes were fixed upon Doctor Somers. "And now, to make you-all understand, I'll have to go back to the very beginning, I'm afraid, and tell you about me. You won't mind?"

I suppressed an exclamation. Truly this quiet, somnolent nurse had changed! I wondered what explanation she was about to offer for her queer conduct of that night before the murder, when the name of "Roaring Lafe" Rutledge had driven her from the house; of her excitement next morning, when she had fainted at the news of Doctor Gaskell's death. And I wondered the more what had moved her to volunteer any information about herself, for I remembered—and the thought had puzzled me more than once—that never, save once, during all her six months at Fort House, had she spoken so much as a word about her past life.

"You won't mind?" she asked again, eyes wistfully fixed upon Doctor Somers. "And you'll try to make allowances—not to think little of me? I——"

She stopped and bit her lips, then went bravely on, slender hands clenched at her sides.

"I was born in the mountains, up near the Tennessee border, in a log cabin on Lick Run. My mother came from the settlements; I never knew my father. He died when I was a baby. I've heard mother say he was educated; that he'd been to college, even. But why they went up into the mountains to live she never would tell me. All I know is that she wouldn't go back to the settlements even when he died. A tree fell on him, mother said. When I was a little girl I used to go out and climb up to the very peak of Snagtooth Mountain and sit beside his grave and wonder—about so many things! He was buried there, on the very top of the mountain, under a big, lone pine tree.

"After that we were very poor, mother and I. I used to go barefoot, summer and winter; and so did she. We never wore shoes, either of us, for years and years." She looked down at her slender, high-arched feet, now so trimly shod, as if in wonder at their being covered.

We were all very still. Somers' deep-set gray-green eyes were inscrutable. I blew my nose hard, seeing in fancy that little slim girl, barefooted and ragged, huddled on the peak of a wind-swept mountain beside the grave of the father she could not remember, hugging bare, brown knees and staring off across the jutting hills, wondering about so many things!

"I wore the same dress for two years," she went on dreamily. Her tragic eyes were all for Doctor

Somers; she was telling her story to him, watching him for sympathy, for approval, for scorn. She would tell him all. I fancied I could read the determination in her white, set face. And then, if he turned from her—well!

"I wore the same dress for two years. Mother patched it and patched it—poor mother—until I'd forgotten its original color. There were homespun patches, I remember, and blue-jean ones, bits of flour sacking and burlap. We were very poor. There was only the small piece of cleared land, and mother wasn't strong enough even to take care of that. The weeds grew higher than the corn. And she'd take my father's ax and try so hard to chop down a little tree and blister her poor hands and cry.

"We couldn't live that way. Then this Lafe Rutledge began coming. They called him Roaring Lafe even then, fourteen years ago. He was a great, big man and strong! I remember once there were two city men out hunting. They were so wonderfully dressed, I thought! I'd never seen such clothes. They stopped for a drink of water from our spring and stood talking with mother. She was so pretty, my mother! And they talked and laughed, and seemed so surprised that mother spoke like a lady, had read books, and everything. And she stood there with her poor cheeks so pretty and pink, and Lafe Rutledge came through the woods behind these two men, looking as big as both of them together, with his great beard blowing in the wind—it was black then—and he just made an awful, roaring

noise like some great bear. Then he ran at those poor men and caught them, each by his neck, and swung them right up off the ground and carried them off like that, at arms' length. And then we heard a scuffling and sliding, as he just threw them down the mountain, and he came back, laughing, and threw their guns after them. I ran away and hid. I was always afraid of him.

"He used to come like that, twice every week, with his big boots greased, his hair slicked down and shiny, and bear's grease and cheap perfumery in his beard. I remember still how it smelled. I was afraid of him, and I think mother was, too. He didn't know how old he was; he couldn't write or figure, and he couldn't read much. I suppose he was fifty, even then. He'd had two wives already, and both were dead.

"I don't know how it came about. Perhaps she did it for me. We were very poor—starving, almost, and Lafe Rutledge was rich, as the mountain folks count it. We didn't know then how he made his money! Anyway, mother married him. That was twelve years ago. She married him, and we went to live in his house on the Devil's Branch. She was his third, he said, with that awful, roaring laugh he had; but, then, he was her second, so that was all right. Poor mother! After all she'd told me about my kind, gentle father, to marry Roaring Lafe Rutledge! I hated it even then; I ran away and hid and wouldn't go there until I was starved to it. But I didn't know, I couldn't understand then, what it meant to her.

"And yet the man was good to her, according to

his lights. He never beat her; he bought her a new dress every year. But he used to go down to the store and get drunk, and then come home running his mule and beating the poor beast. He was dreadfully cruel to animals, and it was hard enough for any horse or mule to carry him; he was so big and heavy. And he'd come up the Branch, beating the mule and shouting and roaring worse than a wild bull; that's why they called him Roaring Lafe, I suppose. And then he'd sit by the fireplace, with a jug at his elbow, and he'd drink and drink. We didn't dare go to bed; mother would sit beside me in a corner, very still—frightened, I suppose, just as I was frightened—until at last he'd drop over right where he sat. Then we'd drag his boots off and get him to bed some way."

She stopped and wet her lips, looking round at us in apology. "You see, I've had plenty of experience in caring for drunken men," she said. Somers flinched visibly.

"It was like a nightmare," she went on, "and it only got worse. Mother got thinner and thinner and whiter and whiter. She knew long before I did; she tried to keep it from me, but it wasn't a year before I found it out, too. Lafe Rutledge was running a still. He made moonshine whisky up on the slope of Snagtooth Mountain, made it by the barrel and sold it all over that country. And nobody dared do anything about it; they were all afraid of him.

"Ten years ago the revenue officers made a big raid up there, and they nearly caught my—my stepfather. He shot one of them and killed him. He

had to hide out in the laurel for months and months, but they never caught him, and pretty soon he'd started up another still in a new place. Then he came home to live, quite openly. I think that killing had been too much for mother. She died about six months later.

"I lived on with him. There was nothing else to do. I was growing up, and I was strong; mother'd taught me to cook; I had to stay; I'd nowhere to go, and I was afraid of him. When he was angry with me he'd threaten to get married again and bring another woman home with him to keep me from getting 'uppity.'

"And then Doctor Gaskell came. He was on a hunting trip, and my stepfather brought him home to supper one night. I'd never supposed there were such men in the world. He was wonderful! I lay awake all night, just thinking about him. He told my stepfather he was forty-nine, I remember; and that was just the age my father would have been if he'd lived. I lay there—I was only eighteen—and pretended Doctor Gaskell was really my father, and we were just visiting up there, just camping out, and in a few days we'd go back home, down the mountains, into the settlements, which mother used to talk about sometimes, into a real house, with carpets and hard-wood floors and a bathtub and a furnace and all the wonderful furnishings I'd dreamed about and never seen. It was a very beautiful dream.

"Things were worse than ever just then; my stepfather was 'sitting up,' as they call it, with a widow

on Lick Run, and I just couldn't bear to think of another woman in the house where mother had died. And so I slipped away and went to Doctor Gaskell's tent on the other side of the mountain, and I talked to him. I'd never been to school a day; for one thing, we were too poor, and I had no dress to wear, and then my stepfather wouldn't let me. He didn't believe in schooling; said it made women high-toned and finickin. He used to laugh and sneer at my poor mother, because she wasn't strong, and say it was book learning made her that way. But mother'd taught me a lot.

"And Doctor Gaskell was so good to me! If he'd really been my own father he couldn't have been better. He offered to take me down to the settlements with him and find me work there and fix it so I could go to night school. I didn't dare at first; I told him Roaring Lafe would kill us both. But he just laughed. That was the most wonderful thing of all—he wasn't afraid of Lafe Rutledge! Until then I'd supposed everybody in the world must be afraid of him.

"So, the end of it was, I slipped out in the night, and Doctor Gaskell took me with him down the mountain and into Asheville. I was so frightened; I thought that must be the biggest city in the world. I'd never dreamed of anything so grand. And we took the train there and went to Raleigh, and the doctor got a place for me in the hospital as an attendant. I studied at night and worked hard! After a year or two I got into the nurses' training school, and I went through it and graduated. The whole

world seemed going just right for me; I was very happy."

She paused and sighed. Her dreamy eyes seemed to dwell on that vision of past happiness.

"But it didn't last," she went on. "I knew all the time, some way, that it couldn't last. I don't know how he found out, but one night my stepfather came to the hospital and asked for me, just as I was going on duty; I was charge nurse on a ward then. I came out, wondering who it could be, for I hadn't many friends, and thinking perhaps Doctor Gaskell might have come down from Pinelands—I hadn't seen him for a year almost—and it was Roaring Lafe! I just stood there dumb. He told me to get my bundle and come with him. I was frightened to death. I've been afraid of him all my life. But I think I'd have found courage to refuse, to call the police, to do *something,* rather than go back with him, but he just stood there, pulling at that great, bushy beard, and he laughed that awful, roaring laugh, so that the orderly ran out to see what the noise was. Then he caught my arm—I wore the mark of it for a month—and dragged me close and whispered in my ear. The smell of raw corn whisky was on him, and his eyes were terrible.

" 'You come along quiet,' he told me. 'If you don't, to-night that mis'able furriner, Gaskell, will git his comeuppance! I'll go plumb f'om here to Pinelands, a-puppose t' waylay him; I'll fill his gizzard with buckshot. You comin', you huzzy, or do you aim t' stay here with these furriners in th' settlemints?'

"So I went with him. What else could I do? I could have screamed for help, though I don't believe he'd have laid his hand on me in anger. But I knew he'd keep his word. I knew he'd leave me there at the hospital and go straight here to Pinelands and kill Doctor Gaskell, just as he said. And I couldn't bear that, after all he'd done. Why, I wouldn't be alive, if it weren't for him! Because I might just as well be dead, as buried up there in the hills, as I was till he came. And I've always made believe in my own mind that Doctor Gaskell was my own father come to life again; I've always thought of him as a father; it was just like hearing my own father had been killed, that morning, when you told us, Mr. Uhlman."

She turned to me, as if to apologize for her fainting that fateful morning, and her big violet eyes were tragic.

"So I went back," she said, as she took up her pitiful tale. "I went back to the log house on the Devil's Branch and put by my nice clothes and wore homespun again and cooked salt pork and corn pone. At night I waited alone for my stepfather to come home, shouting and roaring. I used to sit huddled in a corner, shaking all over, while he drank raw corn liquor until he fell over, dead drunk, and I pulled off his boots and put him to bed. And all the while I was frightened, frightened out of my wits, though he never laid his hands on me. But there was a devil peeping out of his eyes at me. Oh, he's a terrible man!

"And yet I do believe that he thought he was do-

ing the right thing by me. He always used to say he'd saved my soul by bringing me back there.

"It went on from week to week and month to month, for three whole years. At first it was unbearable, and I used to cry all night and think of killing myself. After a while I got sort of deadened and lost interest in things. The days slipped by, and I dropped into a daze and went on like some machine, without even thinking any more. I put on flesh, and my stepfather gloated over the fact, saying how strong I was, as if I'd been a horse or a mule! He insisted that I was outgrowing my finical ways and book learning, and getting to be a healthy, honest woman. If he could have had my poor mother earlier, he used to say, before she was plumb ruined with education, she'd have been healthy, too. And even that didn't rouse me much. I felt so dull and stupid, and I got so I'd sleep all the time. There are women like that in the mountains, strange, fat, stupid-looking creatures, with wide, flat faces, who just sleep and mope around all the time, like cows, without ever caring about anything. They look almost deformed; they're unnatural. Some of them have great goiters. I used to wonder if I'd ever be like them, but I didn't care much, even for that."

Her voice fell. Behind the impassive, commonplace words I felt such a bitterness of desolation, such a gripping, terrible memory of those monotonous, lifeless days, that my throat closed upon the words of sympathy I strove to utter.

Doctor Somers raised his head, his gray-green eyes impersonally alight. "I thought so! A goiterous

region! Mighty interesting, that! You know there is a similar region in the mountains of Switzerland, where most of the women have goiter. We used to think it was the water; but we know better now. I must go up there and investigate. You haven't any struma, Miss Christie," said Somers, stooping forward to touch her rounded throat, at which the girl blushed vividly, "but you developed a condition of hypothyroidism instead." And he went on didactically into a maze of "hormones" and "endocrines" and "internal secretions," which nobody understood. "But you're safely out of that hole now," he concluded practically, "and your condition is practically cured, thanks to the thyroid I gave you. You've changed wonderfully in just this ten days, child! You're a hundred per cent brighter, less somnolent. And," as if the idea had just struck him, "you've grown mighty pretty. Why, Anne, child—you're really beautiful!"

The girl's first name came from his lips unhesitatingly, as if he thought of her thus, and not as Miss Christie. His tone was one of naïve surprise at this discovery.

"You're a raving beauty, Anne!" he repeated.

The girl blushed vividly, the bright color sweeping up to the very edge of her fair hair. Her eyes, which had been so bravely, so candidly fixed upon Somers throughout her pitiful story, dropped modestly and were veiled by long, curved lashes.

"Do you think so?" she asked demurely.

CHAPTER XXIV

A PROJECTED EXCURSION

"DON'T interrupt," ordered Dorothy peremptorily. Like the rest of us, she was eager for the end of the nurse's tale. "You can talk about her good looks later; we want to hear what happened next. Go on, Miss Christie!"

And Miss Christie went on, rather less sadly, I thought.

"Well, I'd have been up there yet, I reckon, if last fall my stepfather hadn't wanted me to get m-married." She blushed. "There was a man, Calvin Collender, whom they called 'Cal Col.' He used to work with my stepfather. Since prohibition, you see, my stepfather had been making corn whisky faster than ever. He bought up corn from all over the mountains and put up a bigger still, and they used to smuggle it out some way and sell it down in the settlements. He used to come back with his pockets just bulging with money, all in gold; he had no faith in paper money, and he'd bury the gold somewhere. Why, he must have made thousands and thousands of dollars—is making it yet, I suppose. And this Collender, this Cal Col, was his chief helper, a tall, thin man, with a sharp nose and a short chin, like those mountaineers have, and little, mean-looking eyes. He was lots older than I; he was a widower, too. And my stepfather kept after me and after me.

He said I ought to be grateful; that it wasn't every man would marry a woman like me, who'd had book learning and knew things it wasn't fitting for a woman to know.

"I couldn't stand that. It was bad enough with Roaring Lafe, but to go to this other man, this Cal Col, who wasn't even brave, I couldn't! I remembered my poor mother, and how she'd just faded away, and I thought it was better to die right then. And Lafe Rutledge was a *man;* you had to respect him, in spite of all his terrible ways. But this Cal Col was just like a creeping, crawly snake, afraid of my stepfather, afraid of the law, afraid of everything, even of me, I think. He used to look at me sideways, with those dry, bright little eyes, just like a rattlesnake. And I knew he'd beat me if he dared.

"So one night last winter I just ran away, down the mountain all alone. It began to snow while I was climbing down toward Asheville, and I was so glad! I knew the dogs couldn't follow me then. My stepfather had a dozen bloodhounds. And I got clear away, somehow, and bought a veil to put over my face; then I took the train and came right here to Pinelands; I didn't know what else to do. If I went back to Raleigh, I knew my stepfather would find me.

"And I got off the train here and went to a hotel. It was in the winter, you see, and the town was full of tourists from the North; nobody noticed one more. I phoned to Doctor Gaskell, and he came right away

and told me about this place. Miss McGregor had asked him to find a nurse for her that very day.

"So he recommended me, and I got the place and came to Fort House. I've been here ever since. Perhaps you've wondered why I kept so close in the house and never went anywhere? Or, perhaps, you just thought I was too sleepy and sluggish to want to go out. But I saw that man Satterfield downtown one day, and I didn't dare show myself after that, for I'd seen him on the Devil's Branch, at my stepfather's, twice. He had something to do with disposing of the liquor they made; I don't know what.

"I couldn't change my name, you see, because I'm a registered nurse and have to have a license. But my stepfather has never lived out of the mountains, and he doesn't know anything about registration and all that; so I wasn't afraid he'd trace me through the State board. I kept right close in the house and hoped Satterfield wouldn't see me or think of my being the same one, if he heard my name. Nobody much knew my name, anyhow, I kept so quiet. People just thought of me as that stupid nurse up at Fort House.

"And I lived in fear that some day my stepfather would find me out, or come here and kill Doctor Gaskell anyway, as he'd threatened; and I think I'd have gone crazy if it weren't for this stupid, sleepy feeling I always had. I suppose it was a disease, as you said, Doctor Somers, but I think it saved my reason.

"And at last he did find me out. Was it any

wonder I was frightened, Mr. Uhlman, when you came in that night and said you'd seen Roaring Lafe Rutledge on Doctor Gaskell's porch, threatening to 'settle with him before sunup?' And now you know why I ran right out without stopping to explain. I went over to the doctor's house, right across the road, and told him my stepfather was here, and I begged him to hide, or have him arrested.

"He only laughed, for he was never afraid of my stepfather. But he did promise not to go to the hotel and see him. And then, next morning, you found him out there—dead! I thought right away it must have been my stepfather who did it, and I suppose I fainted. I was almost glad"—she looked at Dorothy in wistful apology—"when they said Doctor Parker had done it by accident. The—the other seemed so terrible; to think he'd been killed because of me! And then, afterward, when the solicitor made it look like murder, I didn't know what to do. And I hoped you-all could prove it was Satterfield who was guilty, or anybody in that gang except my stepfather, and for any reason except because of me. And it seemed harder and harder"—her beautiful, appealing eyes were fixed upon Somers once more, as in mute explanation of her difficulty—"harder than ever to have to tell all this, and to have to admit that I was only a poor, uneducated girl from the mountains, without any relatives in the world that I know of except my stepfather."

She stopped and bent her fair head, sobbing desolately. Somers patted her shoulder. "You poor child!" he said, his casual tones suddenly deeper,

softer, charged with sympathy. She looked up at him adoringly, with the wistful, worshiping gaze one sees in a dog's eyes. But he seemed blind to its significance.

"Don't you fret any more," he went on. "You needn't marry this Cal Col fellow or any other man. And if Lafe comes roaring round here, he'll get into trouble. I'm not afraid of him, either!"

"Oh, you don't know him. He's terrible—just terrible! Sometimes I wonder if he's quite human. If he comes for me, I'll just have to go back, that's all, and marry Cal Col, if he says so. I—I can't have anybody else murdered for me."

"Humph!" said Somers. "I begin to feel that I ought to have a bit of a chat with this Mr. Rutledge!"

"Oh, no, no, no!" The girl's voice rang sharp with fear; she clutched at his arm. "He—he'd kill you, too!"

"I think not." Somers freed his arm gently and rose. "But look here, Anne, if Rutledge knew you were here, why hasn't he come after you? I don't believe his business with Gaskell had anything to do with you; I don't believe he knows where you are at all. Satterfield admitted that Doctor Gaskell had found out about their whisky-smuggling business; he said his mysterious chieftain had ordered Gaskell killed for that. If Rutledge is this leader whom Satterfield's so afraid of—and it looks that way—he ordered the killing because Gaskell knew too much. You hadn't a thing to do with it. And then he came

down here to do it himself; wouldn't trust Satterfield, I suppose."

He began to pace the floor; six long, loose strides this way, a turn, and six more back. On the hearth-rug he stopped.

"It's plain enough now. Gaskell was murdered by the moonshiners for fear he'd break up the business. And Rutledge did the killing. Now all we've got to do is round up Roaring Lafe and fetch him down here to stand trial. Once he's safe in jail, Satterfield will probably get over his fright enough to testify against him; nobody looks quite as dangerous, once he's been quietly arrested and locked up."

Anne Christie cried out upon him. "Oh, no, no! You mustn't, you can't! You'll be killed! And, anyhow"—plucking up courage at the thought—"it wouldn't do any good; you can't find anybody to serve a warrant on Roaring Lafe. The sheriff wouldn't go up on Devil's Branch for anything, and, if he did, nobody could find Lafe Rutledge, once he'd taken to the laurel."

"Humph!" said Somers. "You're forgetting something." He touched the star on his breast. "I'm a perfectly good deputy sheriff myself. I can serve a warrant. Even if that is another county, I guess we can stretch a point of law. Maybe the sheriff over there will deputize me, too."

He cut her further protests short. "It's getting late; why, it's after midnight! We'll all go to bed and make our plans in the morning."

CHAPTER XXV

A TRIP TO THE MOUNTAINS

NEXT morning at breakfast Doctor Somers set forth his plan. For once all the people of Fort House sat down together; even Aunt Mary appeared in time to be wheeled to her place before we were seated.

"I will go up into the mountains," he announced. "I'll start this evening, spend the night in Asheville, and go on to-morrow. How far is it, Anne?"

"All of twenty miles, the way one has to go, and no roads worth speaking of. You can't drive a car." The girl was very pale; there were bluish shadows beneath her eyes. She spoke reluctantly and seemed determined to make the way as difficult as might be. "And you'd never find the place without a guide."

"Humph! If I can't drive a car, I can ride a horse. They taught us equitation in the army—what, Peter, old son? Also, I can walk; my legs are long enough. And, if you'll draw a map, I'll engage to find the Devil's Branch. I'm not easy to lose, even in the mountains."

Miss Christie still objected, and Dorothy seconded her. "It won't do any good," she declared. "You'll get lost, or killed, and Lewis needs you here. Why not just go to the sheriff or the district attorney and swear out a warrant, and let the police arrest him? That's their business."

Somers shrugged. "Swear out a warrant? On what grounds? He was in town—Rutledge, I mean —and he had threatened to shoot Doctor Gaskell several years ago. That's all we could prove. Satterfield won't testify; he wouldn't even admit to me that Rutledge was the man whom he saw. And, if we could get a warrant on that, your name would have to be signed to it, as complaining witness, and Rutledge would know where you are, Anne. And, if the sheriff's afraid of him, as you say, Rutledge wouldn't be caught anyhow. He'd be warned, have a chance to hide out, and maybe to slip down here and make trouble for you. I wish old man Redden were the sheriff of Whitfield County up there! I'll bet he wouldn't be afraid of Roaring Lafe!"

He paused, looking about the table, with half-whimsical seriousness. "And, furthermore, my children, have you considered that I shan't be perfectly safe here in Pinelands from now on? No, nor you two, either." He jabbed at Peter and me successively with a long, bony finger. "When Satterfield reports to his mysterious chief and tells him that the three of us know all about this whisky-running game of theirs, it's quite on the cards that Mr. Roaring Lafe may decide we could all be spared, just like Gaskell. Suppose we just stayed here and did nothing, and a couple of sturdy bootleggers ambushed Fort House and shot us up?"

Here Aunt Mary interposed. She had been waiting, open-mouthed, for a chance to interrupt.

"I won't have it!" she declared shrilly. "I can't stand it! My rest is broken enough now; those

miserable birds are driving me frantic; I haven't a bit of rest, and nobody cares if I die of exhaustion. But this is too much. You'll have to go, all three of you! You'll have to leave Fort House at once. No, Dorothy, I insist. I will be heard for once. I've submitted to being ignored and put aside and slighted long enough. Nobody considers me any more; nobody seems to care whether I live or die. As if Lewis Parker, a big, healthy young man, weren't lots more comfortable in jail than I am here, lying on my bed of pain! It's absurd—it's monstrous! But I will assert myself for once: Either you men leave this house, all three of you—Peter's no more help or comfort to me than you others—either you leave Fort House, or I will!"

We stared uncomfortably, the others, no doubt, as much amazed as I was by the old lady's colossal, callous selfishness. For she had not a cent of her own, and she was a pensioner upon the bounty of her nephew and niece.

"You can stay," she went on, "but if you do, I go to a hotel this very morning. I won't have my life endangered; I won't have my rest broken any longer! Why, this whole affair of the murder has annoyed me beyond endurance." One would have thought that we had planned Doctor Gaskell's death, with malice aforethought. "But I've stood all I can. Dorothy, phone to the Pinelands House at once and engage two rooms and bath for me. And you'd better pay them a week in advance, too."

"Humph," said Doctor Somers, placidly. "You see?"

Dorothy nodded reluctantly. Miss Christie said nothing. She was very pale.

Somers rose. "It's settled, then. I start for the mountains to-night. And, Peter, you and Uncle George had better come along, I think. You can put up at a hotel in Asheville. I really think you'll be safer there than to stay in Pinelands just now."

"Oh, we'll come," I answered for both of us. "But you needn't think we're going to stay at any hotel and let you go off alone. You need somebody to look after you, man!"

"Humph! Well, we can settle that later." He pushed back his chair and bowed to Aunt Mary. "And now, madam, we'll relieve you of the distress of our presence. Come along, you chaps, we'll stay at Uhlman's house until train time." He bowed ironically and stalked out.

As I followed, I saw Dorothy turn upon her aunt, her face white with anger, her eyes flashing. I grinned inwardly, feeling that for once the old lady was about to hear some sharply wholesome truths.

I hurried after my companions. "Pack a bag, each of you," ordered our leader. "Put in things for a week, anyhow. And bring your field glasses, Peter, and that pistol of yours. Wish we had three of them!"

"I've got one at home," I said, "a police revolver. I'll bring that."

Miss Christie hurried past us, as we stood in the hall, and returned in two minutes. "Here!" She thrust something into Somers' hand. "Take that and use it if you must. And, oh, my dear, be careful!"

She was gone in a breath, leaving the lanky physician staring down in bewilderment at a businesslike revolver, whose wooden butt was battered and worn.

Our few preparations made, for we were to go in light marching order, we spent the day perfecting our plans, such as they were.

"For we don't know what we'll find up there," explained Somers. "The best we can do is to get in touch with Rutledge in some way, avoid suspicion if we can, and trust to luck for the rest. Maybe he'll talk; maybe we can get him out alone, hold him up and take him down the mountains, at pistol's point. I'll be a 'lunger,' I guess; I look the part." He surveyed his lean face, hollow chest, and extraordinarily thin limbs in my mirror. "Yes, I'm a consumptive, ordered up into the mountains to live. You're my uncle, Uhlman, and Peter—oh, he can be the builder who's going to put up a cabin for me. We're up in the hills looking for a site, so I can have a house there, live alone in the balmy pine woods, and strive to recapture my lost health—and all that rot. How about it?"

He grinned and went on humorously. "You know, dear ones and kind old things both, I fancy my health is in considerable danger, at that! If I should meet Satterfield in the dark somewhere, Old Man Trouble and I would meet just about the same time. What?"

And he spoke even more truly than he knew. For at dusk that night, as the train pulled out of Pinelands, Somers sat beside me in the smoking car, his lean, bold profile clearly outlined against the lighted

window. From the dark without it must have made an excellent mark.

No one had loitered about my house that day; no one, as far as I could see, had watched us climbing into the "shoo-fly" train.

But, as we panted out of the village and began to labor up a steep grade between high embankments, gathering speed slowly, a round hole sprang suddenly into being in the window, just beside Somers' head, and a bullet sang past my nose, like an angry wasp, bit through the window opposite, and whined away into the night.

"Humph!" said Somers calmly, brushing bits of glass from his lap. He looked at the window, where a star of cracks radiated from that sinister hole. "Humph! A couple of inches this way, and one of the best little old medico-legal experts extant would have ceased abruptly. I told you we'd be safer outside of Pinelands for a while!"

The brakeman hurried through, stopped to survey his damaged windowpanes, and scowled blackly.

"Some darn fool gettin' fresh!" he muttered. "Lettin' off a rifle gun that a way an' never lookin' to see where th' bullet'd go. The fool! They's too much cawn liquor round Pinelands these days!"

"Quite right, my friend," replied Somers solemnly.

Some one touched Somers' shoulder. We both turned to face the man in the seat behind us, a quiet, unobtrusive person, gray-clad, gray-haired, with a very keen gray eye.

"Did you know that bullet was meant for you?" he asked casually.

The physician nodded. "Oh, yes, certainly!" He was as cool, as detached of manner, as the stranger, and those keen eyes gave him an admiring glance.

"I happened to get a good look at the fellow," the other went on. "He showed up against the sky line, there on top of the embankment, and he had a fine bead on you."

Somers nodded equably. "Thanks, old man!"

"Broad-brimmed felt hat," continued the other; "big, bushy mustache; looked like a pirate. Know him?"

My companion nodded again, but showed no disposition to satisfy the gray man's curiosity further.

As the crow flies, Asheville is not much over forty miles from Pinelands; but to reach it one must go to Raleigh, and there you change from one line to another, making it a trip of several hundred miles. Somers' estimate of time was too sanguine; we could hardly reach Asheville before morning.

As we disbarked at Raleigh, I saw the man in gray once more. He had followed us from the train; he stood in whispered talk with another quiet, inconspicuous person, and I thought that he pointed us out. It may have been my imagination; no doubt it was. For the other stranger, after loitering about, while we bought tickets and berths, stepped up to the window and asked a question, then strolled out of the station, and we saw him no more.

No doubt it was a mere coincidence, also, that the quiet gray-haired man entered the Asheville sleeper with us and deposited a modest leather hand bag in the section across the aisle.

CHAPTER XXVI

ROARING LAFE

WE reached the city of Asheville in the early morning and, upon Somers' direction, entered a taxicab and had ourselves driven to a hotel.

"We'll breakfast there," he decided, "and find out a few things. Then I'll get a saddle horse and start, and you two will wait for me here."

"Not much!" said I.

"Nix!" declared Peter. "You can't lose us; why, man, where's that gorgeous idea of being a consumptive, unless we're along?"

Somers shrugged. "Have it your own way, but it's taking a long chance, fellows. This thing is serious; I hardly believed, myself, that they'd go so far, until that chap shot at me last night. It was Ralph Satterfield, all right, and no doubt he thought we were on our way to Raleigh to see the collector. He'll have hurried over here cross-country before this, in Conover's car, no doubt. If we should meet up with him in the hills we're as good as dead men."

I nodded soberly. "And if we give that fellow, Vanbrugh, a free hand, my nephew is as good as a dead man, too. No, Somers, I'm going along. Peter can stay here if he likes."

But Peter did not consider this suggestion worthy even to be scorned. "After breakfast, what, chief?" he asked.

"We hunt up a revenue agent."

Wondering if our leader would report the activities of Satterfield and Rutledge after all, we went to see the revenue agent. When we were shown into the quiet, businesslike office of the department of internal revenue, Somers merely asked for information as to one Lafe Rutledge. "I'm told he killed a revenue agent some years ago," he explained. "Was he tried for that?"

The clerk eyed us dubiously. "I can't give out any statement," he told us. "You can see the chief if you like. What are you, newspaper men?"

Somers handed him a card, and presently we were shown into an inner office. Facing us from behind a flat-topped desk sat the same quiet, gray-haired man who had sat behind us on the train.

"What do you want to know about the man Rutledge?" he asked, looking at Somers' card. Then: "Hel-lo! You're the chap Satterfield was potting at last night!"

"So you knew the man's name all the time?" asked Somers, a bit taken aback.

The other nodded. "This office is deeply interested in Mr. Ralph Satterfield," he said grimly, "also in the gentleman after whom you are inquiring this morning. Suppose we have a showdown, doctor? I'm not the local chief; I'm on special duty here, but I can tell you all this department knows about Roaring Lafe. What's your interest in him?"

Our leader sat down. "Perhaps you know who I am, too?"

"Oh, yes; Doctor Floyd Somers. You came from

New York to be the best man at Doctor Parker's wedding; and this, no doubt, is the doctor's uncle, Mr. Uhlman—and Peter McGregor?"

We bowed, wondering.

"We looked you up, doctor," explained the revenue agent, "because you were pretty thick with Satterfield for a while. What was the idea?"

Somers leaned forward. "You know about Doctor Gaskell's murder, and the arrest of my friend Parker?" he asked.

"Oh, yes! In fact, this investigation was begun upon information furnished the collector by Gaskell."

"Well, then!" Somers told him everything frankly, including our suspicions of Rutledge.

The government man listened with grave interest. "H'm," said he, when the tale was done. "Our local men seem to have overlooked a lot. We didn't go behind the verdict of the coroner's court and the grand jury; took it for granted Parker killed Gaskell because of some personal quarrel. Coarse work, very! Some one will get a stiff call for this! Of course Rutledge did it. I should have thought of that myself. Well, after all, that is merely incidental; it doesn't affect the main work of this office, which is to break up the illicit manufacture and sale of alcoholic liquors. And now, gentlemen, what can I do in return?"

"Tell us about Rutledge. Is he in hiding? Is there any criminal charge against him? Did he really murder one of your men?"

The agent nodded soberly. "There's not a doubt of it in my mind, but we've no legal proof. No,

gentlemen, there's no criminal charge out against Roaring Lafe—as yet. And he's not in hiding; he's living openly in his own house, on Devil's Branch, back in the hills."

Somers rose. "I thought this was the safest place to make inquiries," he explained. "Thank you, sir."

"Hold on a minute! This office is indebted to you for your information, though I may say we knew most of these things before, except your suspicions about Gaskell's murder; can't we help you some way? What are your plans?"

The physician grinned. "Why, just to find this Roaring Lafe and have a chat. I'll tell him Satterfield has admitted that he saw Gaskell shot, and that Rutledge did it—and see what happens. Then I'll try to induce him to come along to jail with us, if I can."

"You'll get yourselves killed, the three of you!"

Somers shrugged. "It's quite possible, but it is my business in life to extract information from folks who don't want to give it. After one has practiced enough at getting statements from lunatics who haven't spoken a word for years, it ought not to be so hard to badger an ignorant old man into confessing murder. I'm game to try, at least."

"H'm! I think you're a fool, but go ahead, if you insist. Remember this, though: That you never saw a lunatic as dangerous as Lafe Rutledge."

With that pleasing assurance in our ears we left the revenue office and hired saddle horses for our trip into the hills. It was noon before we had topped the long slope, which leads up past the

"Castle," and left the concrete road to strike back along zigzag red clay roads, which led us into the hinterland. We paused for one look back toward civilization.

"Well," said I, staring down at the ordered streets, centering in Pack Square, with its tall granite obelisk, "we may not all of us come back this way."

"Cheerful old soul!" replied Peter, shifting in his saddle. "This nag has a beastly sharp backbone; I can feel it right through the leather. You might have stopped for lunch, at least, Somers."

"Have another sandwich," suggested our leader callously; for he had vetoed a further stay in the city. "Eat as you ride. We want to get somewhere before dark, and we've twenty miles to go."

We struck back into the hills. Our patient horses scrambled up precipitous slopes, panting, sliding in the rough red clay; we slid down other slopes as steep, where the zigzag paths, that ran back and forth, seemed sharper than the pitch of a roof, and the hillside itself was almost straight up and down. The roads grew rougher and stonier and narrower, until they were mere bridle paths, mere trails, which wound and separated and forked and joined bewilderingly.

Mile after mile we rode, growing horribly saddle sore in the riding. The country about us was wild, primeval; tall pines masked the hillsides, interspersed with spruce and live oak and great, dense growths of that rhododendron which the mountain folk call "laurel." Here and there, huddled upon the steep slopes, a tiny, unpainted shack overhung the wind-

ing road, its cornfield miraculously clinging to the side of a precipice. Dozens of lop-eared hound dogs regarded our passing with mournful gravity, or made headlong dashes, boiling out in baying mobs from beneath forlorn shacks to snap at our horses' fetlocks. Sometimes a slatternly woman in a calico dress, roused to languid curiosity by their racket, came to an open door and looked after us with indifferent, lackluster eyes. Of men we saw nothing, save once.

Then I glanced up, warned by the pricking of my horse's ears, to catch a glimpse of a fierce, bearded face, which glowered down at us from the rhododendrons above the trail. The sun, just dropping below a peak, glinted dully from a long rifle barrel, as it moved slightly to bear upon us.

"Cough, Somers! Cough!" I whispered.

Our leader, quick to grasp my hint, coughed nobly, until he swayed in the saddle, handkerchief to his lips.

I spurred forward to support him. "Easy, boys," said I, loudly enough to be heard from the hillside I hoped. "The mountain air is hard on those lungs, but we'll find a good place for your house to-morrow, I hope. Remember, the doctor said these hills were the only place you could live."

We rode on; I, for one, with my heart in my throat. My back muscles quivered and flinched. But no bullet pierced them; no gunshot cut through the silence of the hills. After a mile or two I explained.

Somers shrugged. "They don't seem to welcome

strangers," he admitted. "It's a cheery country." His eyes followed the sharp-toothed, jagged hills, which ringed us in; the abrupt, bleak mountains of North Carolina, whose ridges are too sharp-edged for concealment, were all about us, and the blue sky showed between the trunks of the single, straggling row of slender trees, which found difficult life there. "The hills look about as friendly as their people. Still, I don't believe they'll shoot us without stopping to ask questions first."

With this dubious encouragement we rode on through the long shadows of sunset, which comes so early there; for the sun dropped behind the encircling hills in midafternoon, they were so high.

The rough trails wound on, forking and twisting, and we rode slower and slower, while our leader puzzled over the map Anne Christie had drawn. Dusk came on, and then darkness, and still we rode, Somers scowling uncertainly. At last we made out a point of light in the distance.

Our leader pulled up. "We're lost," he admitted. "I haven't an idea which way to turn, even if we could see the trails, which we can't. I move we stop at that house and ask our way."

So we blundered on through the darkness, and that lone spark of light grew and became the oblong of an unglazed window, toward which our tired steeds trotted, unguided. A yelping, baying avalanche of dogs poured down the slope, to bark and snap at our horses' legs, and to jump viciously up for a grip upon our own. We halted.

"Hello, the house!" called Somers, reluctant to dismount because of the dogs.

Abruptly the light above us went out. We heard a door close somewhere. Then the clamor of the hounds lessened, and presently it ceased. They lowered their tails, began to sneak away, as I could see through the dusk. And a harsh voice was raised, so close to us that I jumped involuntarily, and my horse plunged.

"What's yore business here, strangers?"

Somers coughed promptly. "We're honest travelers," I explained. "My nephew here has consumption; his doctor has sent him into the mountains to live, and we're hunting a place. Can you tell us how to reach Devil's Branch?"

"Devil's Branch?" The man's voice held a queer, interrogative note. "Huh! Strike a light, stranger; le'me look at you-all. Hit's a right onhealthy place for sick folks, the Devil's Branch. Uh-*huh!*"

I despair of reproducing in print his twanging drawl, his quaint idiom, his pronunciations, so different from the speech of the lowlands, less than fifty miles away.

Somers lit a match obediently, and its flickering light shone on his lean, sallow face, exaggerating the hollows of his cheeks, throwing his bold, hooked nose into high relief.

"Huh?" asked the mountaineer. "'Member I got a bead on you-all agin' th' sky line! Are puny lookin', hain't yuh?" Then with renewed suspicion: "What you-all lookin' for on Devil's Branch?"

"A place to build a cabin," I told him.

"Down, Tige!" he said, as one of the hounds began to yap again. "Hit's a right cur'us place fer furriners. Don't look right t' me, nohow. Huh? Hain't my lookout, no ways; hit's Lafe's bus'ness. You-all jus' keep a-goin' up th' Branch yander an' pass two li'l' runs; at th' next run don't go no furderer, but turn up hit an' foller 'long."

"How far?"

"Hit's right smart of a piece—mebbe two set-downs an' a long look. Yassuh, hit's all o' that."

"And how'll we know when we get there?"

The mountaineer chuckled. "Ho, you-all'll *know*. Ho, yas! Hain't no wonderment 'bout that!"

I asked another question, but there was no reply. The man had vanished as silently as he had come; his long gun barrel no longer showed faintly, menacing us. I was relieved. We rode on, our tired horses stumbling and laboring among the loose pebbles, following directions as best we might in that Stygian blackness.

We passed by the two runs and turned up the third, which seemed to lead steeply up through a narrow valley, almost a cañon. On either side long, sharp ridges stood blackly out against the sky.

The way grew rougher, steeper; the horses stumbled over fallen logs, brambles tore at our clothing, unseen branches whipped back and cut smartly across our faces. At last we stopped again, unable to advance another step through this tangled maze.

Somers dismounted. "Looks like we sleep out, unk," he remarked, forced cheerfulness in his tired

tones. "We're stuck. I wish I could lay my hands on Roaring Lafe Rutledge!"

A deep voice answered him from the bushes. We all started violently, and I think I cried out.

"You kin, stranger!"

CHAPTER XXVII

IN THE HANDS OF THE ENEMY

SOMERS turned slowly, and, though it was so dark, I could see that his hands were held high. Peter and I hastened to elevate ours.

"Who are you?" he asked quietly. "What do you want?"

A gruff laugh answered him. "You done said my name, stranger. An' what does you-all want, an' what fer are ye calling Roaring Lafe?"

"Doctor Major, down in the city, said you were the man to see," replied Somers coolly. "My name is Winters, John Winters. I've got consumption, and they sent me into the mountains to live. This is my uncle, George Winters, and Mr. Scott. We want to buy land for a cabin for me, and Mr. Scott's going to build it."

An incredulous grunt replied, as the bushes crackled, and a huge shape emerged. Straining my eyes through the dark, I made out the pale blur of a white beard, which the man stroked thoughtfully.

"Don't yuh pay 'em no mind, Lafe," said another voice, a shrill, ugly voice, with a tremor in it. "Shoot 'em down! Them's revenooers!"

"You hark, Cal Col! I aim t' tend my bus'ness my own self. Git on them hosses, you-all, an' foller me. We-all'll fetch 'em up to th' cabin an' look 'em over there."

We obeyed exactly. Though Roaring Lafe had not thought it necessary even to warn us, the repeating rifle in his hand was eloquent; and, as we spurred after his huge figure, another man and another broke through the laurel behind us, until we were flanked and followed by at least half a dozen, all carrying rifles.

"In for it now!" said Peter.

"Shut up!" replied our leader.

We went on in silence, save for the creak of saddle leathers, the stumbling footfalls of our horses; the men all about us moved like wraiths, noiselessly. We mounted a steep grade, for I had to lean forward to keep the saddle; then we wound through a tangle of laurel and came out into a clearing, which seemed almost light in contrast with the blackness below. Before us loomed the dim outlines of a big log cabin. When we had reached it our captor said:

"Light down, you-all! Git in!"

He scorned to threaten, even to warn us, but his rifle barrel pointed his request. We obeyed without words, ducked our heads to pass the low lintel, and entered a bare, puncheon-floored room, with a rough stone fireplace at one end.

I looked about it curiously, as at some remembered spot. A rude homemade armchair stood before the fire, and on a stand beside it rested a gallon jug. There Roaring Lafe had sat many and many a night, year after year, talking and drinking. In that corner, perhaps, Anne Christie had huddled, a tattered, brown-legged girl beside her mother; a half-grown maiden, dreaming her dreams of the "settlements;"

a woman full grown, dainty and fair, recalling bitterly her free, broad life, which seemed so hopelessly behind her, and always frightened; shivering with fear of this hulking, ignorant, bullying brute, Lafe Rutledge.

It was very pitiful; it made her story more real, more terrible in its quiet pathos. My eyes smarted, and I think that Somers' thoughts must have run in the same channel, for he faced Rutledge with a new defiance.

"Now what do you mean," he demanded, "by stopping honest folks in this fashion?"

Rutledge grinned, showing long, yellow teeth in his beard. "W'y, wa'n't you-all a-wishin' an' a-honin' fer to find Roarin' Lafe?" he asked. "What do you-all aim to see him about? What's yore bus'-ness? Speak up, now!"

The man called Cal Col interrupted again, his dry eyes darting hither and thither, his lean features working hungrily.

"Kill 'em, Lafe! Kill 'em right off! Them's revenooers, I tell ye; hain't no use o' waitin' fer 'em to lie to ye."

Somers turned upon him fiercely enough: "You lie yourself!"

Cal Col stepped swiftly behind the bulky form of his leader. "You le' me be!" he whined.

The other mountaineers, rough, bearded men in homespun and cowhide boots, laughed and nudged each other. I judged that Cal Col was not a general favorite.

"Hush yo'r yap, boys! Hit hain't healthy fer

furriners here on Devil's Branch, stranger. 'F you got consumption, I shore am sorry fer hit; but we-all cain't have no furriners up here. Hit was a furriner done stoled my gyurl." The craggy, beetling brows drew down over hot eyes; Roaring Lafe's deep voice grew deeper, louder, more unfriendly. "You-all kin git, right now! Hank, guide 'em out an' onto th' trail fer Azalea. They-all can fetch hit, come mornin'."

"But not to-night!" protested Somers. "Our horses are beat out."

"Git!" repeated Rutledge sternly.

But now his men began to murmur. "Look-a-here, Lafe!" began the fellow called Hank. "Hit hain't safe! Mebbe they hain't revenooers, but they sure kin——"

Rutledge snorted. "Hain't got sense!" he replied contemptuously. "An' they don't know nothin'."

"Revenooers!" repeated Cal Col shrilly. He made a dash at Peter, the smallest of us, and gripped his coat. "Kill 'em! A-a-a-ah!"

It was a howl of triumph. For Peter's coat tore open under that clutch, and on his vest shone the deputy-sheriff's star which he had forgotten to conceal!

The mountaineers growled ominously. "Sneaks! Spies! Revenooers!" Half a dozen menacing rifle barrels thrust out at us.

All was lost; but we would sell our lives as dearly as we might. We whipped out the pistols, which

Rutledge's contemptuous confidence had left us, and stood with backs to the wall.

The door burst open, and Ralph Satterfield dashed in, panting.

"Lafe! Hank! All here? Lissen, fellers, it's all up!" He paused in wonder at the tableau; then a malevolent grin plucked at his piratical mustache. "Well, dog my cats! You-all got 'em a'ready! Lissen, Lafe, them fellers is spies! They bin watchin' an' doggin' round an' seen us handlin' that liquor an' run straight t' Raleigh las' night to squeal! Hull revenue bunch'll be onto our necks directly. An' they come up here!" he exclaimed, with gloating malice. "Ain't that nice, huh? Kill 'em!"

Roaring Lafe gestured the rifles aside, and beneath the shaggy brows his eyes flamed coldly.

"Git back!" he said. I saw how he had earned his title. "Git back! Le' me settle this here!" The cabin echoed to his roar.

He advanced upon us, alone, empty-handed. His fierce old eyes glowed, his thick beard fairly bristled with inhuman rage. On he came, full in the face of Somers' leveled pistol, heeding it no more than a pointed finger.

There was something terrible, superhuman, in that slow, implacable advance. The power of the man shone out; I tasted to the full that paralyzing fear Anne Christie had tried to voice. I felt that this huge old man was invulnerable, unconquerable; his absolute certainty beat down my will. I suppose a rabbit feels thus, watching the advance of a stoat; a bird, charmed by some venomous snake, could be

no more helpless than I was then. Despite me, the pistol barrel dropped. I could not resist; he had only to stretch out his hand.

Beside me Peter's face showed white and slack; beads of perspiration shone on it. His hands dropped nervelessly.

But Somers grinned. "I'd hate to shoot my father-in-law," he drawled, "but——"

"You needn't," said a dry, quiet voice from without. "Hands up, all! You're covered!"

CHAPTER XXVIII

RUTLEDGE TALKS

THE mountain men whirled. Roaring Lafe ceased his advance to look over a burly shoulder. In the doorway of the cabin stood the quiet, gray man, the revenue agent. Beside and behind him were armed men; rifle barrels bristled in all of the shack's windows. The moonshiners were surrounded, outnumbered, helpless. With one accord they dropped their guns and raised resigned hands above their heads, all but Roaring Lafe. Bellowing, he sprang toward the door, the window, only to turn back from ready gun muzzles. Then his bearded face horribly contorted, his foam-flecked lips twitched back from long, yellow teeth, and he sprang full at Somers' throat.

"I'll tote yuh to death along of me, anyhow," he said. "You spyin' sneak!"

The revenue agent cried out, and I sprang forward. But in that crowded room none dared shoot, for the mountaineers milled already, crouching for a dash. I hovered over the whirling bulk of the raging moonshiner, seeking to fire without endangering Somers' lank, convulsively thrashing limbs.

It was over in an instant. The slender physician, overwhelmed, fell sprawling, apparently helpless, his left hand feeling along the other's huge arm. A mere touch, it seemed, upon that mass of muscle,

a strangled roar, and Rutledge's right arm dropped helplessly.

Somers twisted in his grip and freed a hand still holding the heavy pistol, which Anne Christie had given him. I gasped.

But he did not fire. Instead, the pistol's lying barrel tapped his huge adversary neatly across the base of the skull, and Roaring Lafe Rutledge relaxed. His great arms all abroad, he settled slowly upon his back, inert as a pole-axed steer.

The physician rose, feeling gingerly of his throat. "It's all in knowing where to hit 'em," he said hoarsely.

The captured mountaineers eyed him admiringly. "Well, dog my cats!" exclaimed the man called Hank. "Fust time ever I seed anybody best Roarin' Lafe! I wouldn't 'a' believed it."

"Come, men," ordered the government agent briskly. "Round these fellows up and search 'em. You, Bailey, Gaines, and Lipkowitz, stick around. We've made a clean sweep, I think; but pick up anybody else who comes in here, and in the morning destroy that still. You know where it is, Gaines, and now come along down. You can ride the horses tied outside there. Somers, you and your friends had better come with us."

The revenue men moved swiftly. Soon a little heap of pistols and knives lay on the floor beside the guns dropped by their prisoners.

"Take charge of these weapons, Bailey," ordered the chief again. "You others, rope these chaps and come along."

It was done forthwith, and we all set out, the gray-haired man in front, carrying an electric belt lamp, behind him the seven prisoners in single file, the right wrist of each handcuffed. Each empty cuff was knotted to a long rope at four-foot intervals, so that they made a long line, fastened securely together. Revenue officers with ready rifles marched on either side, while Somers, Peter, and I dragged wearily behind.

I soon saw why the prisoners were fastened thus oddly, for we plunged straight down the mountainside, on foot, in a long line. The slope was so steep that we all had to clutch at the close-growing trees, climbing as if down a steep ladder. The prisoners made heavy weather of it; their shackled arms were hampered, and the rope, which bound them together, was continually catching and retarding them. But, with both hands secured, they could never have negotiated that dizzying slant; and, unless all had been fastened together, one or more would surely have been able to make an escape on that dark, wooded mountainside which they knew so well.

As it was, after what seemed an age of sliding and scrambling down grades, which just missed being perpendicular, we reached a little clearing on comparatively level ground, all breathless and scratched, our clothes half torn off. We had come ten miles, I suppose. Already dawn was gray in the east, and I, for one, was exhausted. I hailed the motor cars which awaited us with a prayer of silent thanksgiving.

My comrades seemed almost as tired as I, and the

gray-haired revenue agent turned a drawn, haggard face to the early light.

"We're well out of that!" he said. "A couple more hours up there might have seen an attempt at rescue. Roaring Lafe has plenty of friends on the mountain."

Rutledge had preserved a somber silence ever since he returned to consciousness. He stood with bent head, his magnificent physique apparently unwearied by our forced march. Now and again he turned a queer, almost admiring look upon Somers.

He did not reply to the government man's remark, but the fellow called Cal Col laughed jeeringly.

"Yah!" he said. "Lafe Rutledge hain't got no friends in th' mountains *now*, no more'n he has kinfolks! They's plenty will be glad that he's done cotched—roarin' an bullyin' round like he done!" His snaky eyes were filled with malevolence.

"Shut up!" ordered one of his guards and slapped him across the sneering mouth. I think we were all disgusted by his haste to vilify his fallen leader.

"Yessir, cap'n, I kin tell you-all lots o' things. I'd have turned up all this moonshinin' an' blockadin' meanness long ago, on'y I done bin a-scaret o' Lafe Rutledge." He fawned upon the government man, crooked teeth showing in a repulsive, insinuating smile.

Rutledge smiled bitterly, but did not speak. I wondered what his thoughts might be; if he regretted now that he had once tried to force his stepdaughter into a marriage with this—this reptile?

At the end of a rough wagon track stood three

motor cars, a couple of flivvers and a light express truck, covered with wire gratings at either end. Into this the officers urged their prisoners, still bound together, and padlocked the grated door behind them. The truck made a tolerable substitute for a Black Maria, even if its passengers had to seat themselves upon the floor. An armed man took his place beside its driver and faced backward to watch the prisoners.

"Drive on, Brownell," ordered the gray man. "And, remember, you in there, we're coming right behind, with half a dozen rifles trained on that truck every minute!"

We three piled into one of the flivvers, and the rest of the government men followed, filling every seat, clinging precariously to the running boards.

That was a wild drive down the mountainside, though we went slowly enough, perforce. But there was no more than a track, rough and uneven, winding among stumps and fallen trees; huge roots and boulders lay athwart it, so that we were shaken like corn in a popper, and I wondered how these cars had ever been made to climb so high, when the going down seemed about to wreck them at every turn. The mountaineers, huddled on the floor of that truck, must have suffered cruelly, with no seats to which they might cling; but no murmur escaped them. Only Cal Col kept up a constant wail, until the man nearest him struck him heavily across the mouth, silencing him effectually.

At last we were down, without having broken either a spring or any of our bones, and by seven

o'clock our odd procession pulled up before the Asheville city prison. The government agent clambered stiffly out. "I'll make a deal with the chief of police to take care of these birds until we can bring them before the commissioner," said he. "Doctor Somers, I'm greatly obliged to you and your friends. It was risky, of course, to use you men as decoys, but, thanks to you, we caught the whole gang together. You brought in their sentinels for us, and we had a clear field. You might have been killed, of course, but it came out very well. Can I do anything in return?"

Somers nodded. "Why, yes. You can turn that man Rutledge over to me, as a regularly appointed deputy sheriff of Carabas County. He's wanted over there. I'll get a warrant first and serve it. You'll keep him safe until then?"

The other bowed a grim head. "Oh, yes, and for the next twenty years, at least!"

While we talked, the prisoners were being unloaded, to the curious delight of a rapidly gathering crowd. Old Rutledge descended ponderously, his eyes upon Somers. Meeting that odd, almost friendly regard, the lanky doctor started.

"Here, man," he said excitedly. "You can do this: Give me a chance for a quiet talk with Rutledge now. Maybe I can get something out of him."

The revenue agent agreed readily, and in ten minutes we faced the huge mountaineer in the little office of the jail. A stalwart officer stood on either side of him, pistol in hand; for Roaring Lafe was too notorious to be guarded carelessly.

Doctor Somers leaned toward him impulsively. "Look here, Rutledge! There's a friend of mine in jail, over there in Pinelands, waiting his trial. He was married the other day, and his bride is waiting for him, crying her eyes out. You're an old man; won't you help them?"

The moonshiner looked back at him squarely, his bright old eyes curiously wistful and soft. "I hain't havin' no truck 'ith furriners," he answered slowly, "but I'll do whut I kin for *you,* stranger. Yore th' fust one ever bested Roaring Lafe yit; I cain't tell now how yuh done hit. Whut kin I do?"

"Confess!" said Somers swiftly. "You might as well; we've got you anyway. Confess, and let poor old Parker out now, instead of keeping him until you're tried."

Rutledge laughed hoarsely. "Confess? W'y, stranger, hain't no need o' me confessin', hardly. They done cotched me, still an' all!"

"Yes, for blockading, I know, but not for murder."

"Murder? What-all ye talkin' 'bout, stranger? I ain't done no killin' meanness—not in Carabas County."

"I'm talking about the murder of Doctor Gaskell," said Somers impatiently. "Don't try to pretend you don't know that! We can prove it on you, only it'll take longer."

Roaring Lafe stared at us. "But I hain't done no killin' in Pinelands," he repeated. "I'm a-tellin' ye th' truth, stranger," he declared, not without a cer-

tain rude dignity. "Don't ye go fer t' call Lafe Rutledge a liar, suh!"

And then, seeing our puzzlement, he leaned forward confidentially. "I'll tell ye," he said hoarsely. "I'll tell you-all th' whole thing. I did aim for t' kill Gaskell, account o' this here." His wide gesture indicated his guards, his handcuffs, the jail. "He done found out more'n he'd oughter, an' I sont word Satterfield was t' fix 'im, lessen he sh'd do whut he done. An' 'en I come down t' Pinelands my own se'f. We'd had dealin's oncet, Gaskell an' me, an' I didn't aim t' do no meanness lessen I jist hadda. I went to 'is house, an' I done sont 'im word to tell I aimed t' settle 'ith him come sunup. An' I went to his house that night, aimin' for to waylay 'im, come mornin', like I said. Satterfield was there, an' I sont 'im back, aimin' t' do th' job my own self. Well, after while—long mebbe a hour afore sunup—out come Gaskell 'ith 'is doctor bag an' sot out th'oo th' pines acrost th' big road. I follered after 'im, 'ith my pistol gun ready. He traveled 'long th'oo them pines an' into th' bresh, an' me after 'im, ontwel I—I seen th' ha'nt. An' 'en I lit out a-runnin'. Yessuh!"

He stopped, curiously shamefaced, and stared at Somers, with a sort of sulky defiance.

"You—you saw a haunt—a ghost?"

"Uh-huh!" The tough-souled old reprobate nodded violently, so that his patriarchal beard wagged again. "Yassuh! I seen th' ha'nt, all white, like in a shroud, an' blue smoke like brimstone 'round about, an' eyes a-flamin' dreadful—an' I shore did light a

shuck outa there. Gentlemen, hush! I don't aim t' have no truck 'ith ghosteses."

His big, bold face was all twisted with superstitious awe; the hand which clutched his beard was trembling. There could be no doubt that he spoke the truth. Whatever loose newspaper or waving sheet had wrought upon his ignorant fancy, he was fully convinced that he had encountered a spirit, and had been driven by it from his intended crime.

"And you didn't shoot Gaskell? Did you see anybody else there? Was Satterfield gone?"

"Nossuh—yassuh. I aimed fer to shoot 'im, but I plumb didn't! I jist tuck my foot in my hand an' lit a-runnin'. Ner I didn't see nobody, neither. I didn't look round, lessen th' ha'nt was a-follerin' of me; but Satterfield, he'd done gone back up th' hill long afore that."

Somers groaned aloud. I could have wept. Weary as I was, I had been buoyed up by hope until now. I had borne with all this strain and fatigue, exulting within myself that now, at last, Lewis would be freed. This blow was too much. The room whirled before me; Somers' face blurred, grew monstrously big, then receded from my sight. I heard his voice faintly:

"Well, then, in Heaven's name, who *did* kill Gaskell?"

Rutledge's reply sounded fainter yet, a hoarse whisper, trembling with superstitious dread. "I reckon hit musta been th' ha'nt!"

"The ghost!" Somers' voice was reflective, almost

convinced. "I believe you're right, Rutledge; it must have been the ghost!"

The words seemed to come from an immense distance; they rang in my ears like a knell. "Poor Somers!" I thought. "He's gone crazy; he's off his head about this thing, just like the rest of us!"

Then I lost consciousness.

CHAPTER XXIX

THE RETURN

I WOKE with a start, in a strange room, staring about me in dull wonder. Oh, well, it was scarcely daylight, and I was still tired out. I would go back to sleep and save my questions until breakfast time. I turned over, yawning, but a familiar voice dragged me back from slumber.

"Get up, unk!" It was Peter McGregor. "You'll have to get going; train leaves in an hour."

Again I yawned. "What time is it?"

"Seven o'clock." Then he laughed at my exclamation. "No, unk, seven at night. You've only slept twelve hours. Hurry up, now, we've got to be back in Pinelands by morning."

Reluctantly enough I rose, every stiff old joint aching, and tumbled into my clothes. Peter and Doctor Somers were dressed and throwing their few belongings into traveling bags.

Presently we set out for the Asheville station and the eight-fifteen train, which would take us to Raleigh, a silent, disconsolate trio, as much at sea as on the morning of Doctor Gaskell's mysterious murder. We had followed trail after trail with such high hopes; our suspicions had pointed here and there; and each suspect had cleared himself. I groaned aloud as we three sat in the Pullman smoking room.

"All we really know, up to date," said I, "is that Gaskell left his house, and was killed an hour before Lewis came out there."

Somers nodded. "Even that is going to be hard to prove," he answered gloomily. "One point rests on the unsupported word of a notorious blockader, a fellow more than suspected of one murder, and now under arrest for making moonshine whisky. Vanbrugh will tear his evidence into tatters, even if he'll testify. And the other point: that Gaskell had been dead some time when Parker fired; it rests on your word alone. And you'll have to admit yourself that you were pretty well upset."

"Maybe Rutledge killed him, after all," I suggested weakly.

"I doubt it. And, even if he did, we can't prove it. We can't prove he even saw Gaskell that morning, except by his own statement, which wouldn't go far in law."

Peter leaned forward, scowling. "Look here," he began. "Now don't get sore, unk; promise? Because, even if he did, I'm for him all the way, and no doubt he had provocation we know nothing about. But have you thought that maybe Lewis did kill him, after all? No"—as I would have gone over the evidence once more—"no, I don't mean then, when you heard the shot. But he might have gone out there at four o'clock; it was quite light, even at that time, and he might have met Gaskell and shot him. Then he was scared, of course, and he went to the house and cleaned his gun and reloaded it and came back at five, meaning, no doubt, to pretend he'd just

found the body. He'd have said he just got up, and, when he went into that tangle after the quail, he found Gaskell's body by the path, dead and cold. His gun would be clean, both barrels loaded, and nobody'd have suspected him. But, when he got out there, he tripped, and the gun went off by accident; that's the way it happened, you said yourself, unk. And the constable just happened to be coming past and heard it, and there he was!"

"Nonsense!" said I. "That's absurd." But was it? I had to admit to myself that it was an adequate explanation, that it fitted most diabolically into all we knew about the case. I closed my eyes; I could see the whole thing. Lewis, gun in hand, prowling through the dawn after quail; Gaskell meeting him on the path, carrying his medicine case; the quarrel. There would have been hot words; my nephew had not forgotten his anger of the day before. A sneering laugh, perhaps, as the older man lost patience; Lewis' unruly temper flaming forth; the shotgun in his nervous hands, leveling itself; the explosion! And then my poor, impulsive boy, shuddering at the sight of a bleeding body; creeping stealthily through the bushes, cleaning and reloading the gun with hands that shook; waiting for the body of his victim to stiffen; whipping round the old house to advance boldly down that fateful path—with what inward tremors and self-loathings! He comes on slowly, looking for the body; it should be about here. And then a stumble; the shotgun, forgotten in his unsteady hands, the finger tightening involuntarily upon its trigger; the second shot! And upon its heels an

outcry, the pounding run of Constable Wakefield; the accusation!

No wonder Lewis had seemed dazed! He must have thought it retribution, the accidental discharge of his gun bringing back upon him all the public guilt he had sought so cunningly to conceal.

And then I shook my head stubbornly. Lewis Parker do that? No! He was my nephew, almost my son; I knew him as I knew myself.

"Nonsense!" I repeated sturdily. "My boy never did such a thing as that. He might have killed Gaskell in the heat of passion, but he never sneaked and hid afterward, or plotted out such a scheme as that to escape. I don't—I won't believe it!"

"I sure do hope you're right, unk," said Peter heavily. "But it does seem beastly logical."

It did. It was fiendishly, horribly logical. I could see that if such an idea occurred to Vanbrugh, the solicitor, the poor defense we could proffer would become a boomerang to destroy us. For, on the face of it, we could make the killing appear an accident, perhaps; at the worst an impulsive, unpremeditated act. But this other, this sneaking off to reload and returning to discover the body—this cunning scheme frustrated, as Vanbrugh would make it appear, by the accidental discharge of the gun—why, it made my nephew a cold, deliberate murderer! Shuddering I recalled my dream of the explosion of that cannon in my bedroom. That must have been the first shot, the shot which had killed Gaskell! Had Lewis pulled the trigger?

All this while Somers had sat silent, chin in his

long, bony hands, a cigarette drooping from his sour, discontented lips. I turned to him impatiently.

"What do you think, Somers? You know my nephew; is he capable of such a thing as that?"

The lanky physician raised his head and stared at me with deep-set, inscrutable, gray-green eyes. "I told you this morning," he replied. "From all we've found out I'm beginning to believe it was the ghost killed Gaskell." And his chin dropped again. Well, there was little enough satisfaction in that!

CHAPTER XXX

AN AGITATED HOUSEHOLD

WE descended from the train at the Pinelands depot into a bright, sunny morning. And, even above the throbbing of the train, the sighing of released air brakes, I heard the strident cry of those detestable quail. I shook my fist in a paroxysm of unreasonable fury.

Those cursed bobwhite! If it hadn't been for them and Aunt Mary's fool complaints, this thing would never have happened.

We climbed into the station's solitary jitney and had ourselves driven to Fort House.

The family were all at table. Entering the dining room, my eyes fell first upon Miss McGregor; and I was appalled. Her thin face, beneath the crown of snowy hair, was ghastly, greenish pale, and the delicate skin hung in bags beneath her eyes. She had changed startlingly in these last two days. Poor old woman! She was not long for this world, I thought.

Then my thoughts were interrupted by glad, agitated outcries. Dorothy fell upon my neck, weeping, and clutched me tight; and Anne Christie, usually so self-contained, hugged me, too, and ran on to grip Doctor Somers by both hands.

"Oh, Uncle George!" exclaimed Dorothy. "Oh, Peter!" And she put out a hand to him. "We're so

glad you came, so glad you're back, all three of you! It's been just terrible here!"

Miss Christie nodded emphatically, and they both wept and hugged us all and dragged us into the dining room and seated us. They were both talking at once, tremulously, frantically glad of our coming. And all this while Aunt Mary sat, rigid, staring at nothing, her face terribly white and old, too much absorbed in her own gloomy thoughts to be either glad or sorry we had returned. But every time the quail whistled outside the windows, she flinched visibly.

"Now, then," I began, as the tumult subsided a trifle, "what's all the excitement about? And where's Rosina?" For Dorothy herself had gone to the kitchen for our coffee and Miss Christie was bringing in the toast.

At that the babble recommenced. "Rosina's gone —left this morning. Said she couldn't stand it here. Too many 'ha'nts and ghostesses' for her," the girls answered, both talking at once. "And, oh, how I wish we could all go! It's been just terrible!"

"Hold on," said Somers, and the two girls subsided momentarily. "One thing at a time. First, let us assure you, Miss McGregor, that you won't be annoyed because we came back. The gentlemen, who would have liked to abolish us, are all safe in jail."

"Oh, goody! Then Lewis is all right?" Dorothy glowed at the idea.

Somers nodded. "He'll be all right," he replied evasively.

Miss Christie had turned pale. "And my—my stepfather?"

"Yes, Anne, Rutledge, too. He can't trouble you now."

"And did he——"

"No, it wasn't Rutledge, but he told me where to look. However, that will keep. Now tell us, you first, Anne, what's wrong here?"

The nurse began obediently. "It's the Poltergeist. We've just been frightened to death! Night before last and last night, too, all over the house. Miss McGregor had sent me out, and I was in the living room with Dorothy, and we heard awful shrieks from the basement. We ran down there, and the Poltergeist had been in Rosina's room and pulled the bedclothes off her and stuck pins into her legs, and everything. And this morning Rosina packed up and left, two hours ago. Wouldn't stay to get breakfast, even."

"That was last night," Dorothy took up the tale. "On the previous night the Poltergeist was in my room and smeared cold cream all over my dresser and emptied my powder box into the clothes-press and s-stole my wedding dress and s-stuck it in the f-furnace. It's just r-ruined and spoiled! I don't believe any other body ever had such a time!"

"And we're all so frightened—so s-scared that we were just saying if you men didn't come back—if you-all left us alone any longer, we'd go to the hotel to-night!" Thus the duet continued.

"Humph!" said Somers queerly. "Ghosts again. Perhaps this Poltergeist isn't as harmless as you said,

when I first came down here. So it visited Rosina and you, Dorothy. How about you, Anne? Did you come in for its attentions?"

The nurse nodded, big-eyed. "I sat in the living room last night after Dorothy got me up. She was afraid to go back to bed and we sat in there and dozed off, I reckon. Anyway the first I knew I was right on the floor! The Poltergeist had pulled my chair out from under me, and Dorothy never saw a thing, either!"

"Not one thing!" Dorothy corroborated. "But then I expect I was asleep, too. We're all just used up, Doctor Somers. Nobody in this house has had two hours of sleep in the last two nights, unless it was Aunt Mary."

"Humph! And where was Miss McGregor when all these things happened?"

All this while Aunt Mary had sat mute, stonily calm, showing neither pleasure nor annoyance at our return, apparently quite uninterested in the pranks of the Poltergeist. But now she straightened, with a queer, hostile glance at the physician.

"Where was I?" she asked. "Where could I be? I lay helpless in bed, where I'd been put, as a poor old paralytic has to! Lay there all alone, forgotten, as usual! I suppose," she went on acidly, "I should have risen on my poor, useless limbs and run out to protect three perfectly healthy women?"

"And did the Poltergeist annoy you, too?"

"Never mind! Who cares what happens to me? I'm nothing but a helpless cripple, a drag and a

hindrance." Her white lips worked pitifully. "But I won't trouble anybody much longer."

I believed her this time; she looked ghastly. And I pitied her sincerely, in spite of her callous selfishness, her bitter tongue.

Doctor Somers pushed back his plate and rose. "You've had a bad time," he said, taking the old lady's veined hand. "Does your spine trouble you much to-day? How are the knots in your neck?"

His voice was inimitably gentle, sympathetic, winning. Aunt Mary softened to it at once, and, after he had wheeled her into the sitting room, discussed her ailments for an hour or more in quite her usual manner. The strain of her pale face lessened; a faint color returned to her lips. If this were Doctor Somers' bedside manner, I thought, he must be a most successful practitioner.

Gradually he led the talk from Aunt Mary's symptoms and drew her on to discuss the Poltergeist and spiritualism generally. The old lady expressed very positive opinions. She had read widely on the subject, I could see, and her talk was interesting enough. But what Somers' sudden interest in spiritism might be, I could not fathom.

Presently he spoke of the ouija board. "I have one," said the old lady. "I've had many very important communications through ouija."

Next, I scarcely know how it was brought about, she had volunteered to give us a demonstration. Miss Christie fetched the ouija board and set it upon her knees. Blindfolded, Aunt Mary put her finger tips on the little three-legged indicator, and Somers, also

blinded, followed suit. They sat there, knee to knee, motionless.

"Some one put a question," directed the old lady sepulchrally.

"Who—who spoiled my wedding dress?" asked Dorothy, a little thrill in her voice.

Under our eyes the indicator began to move slowly, mysteriously, apparently of its own volition. Leaning over my shoulder, Dorothy read the letters it pointed out to the blindfolded operators.

"P-O-L-T-E—— Why, Uncle George!" Her excited breath fanned my cheek. "It's spelling 'Poltergeist!'"

And so it did. And the queer, superstitious thrill of the unexplained caught hold of us all. We breathed quicker, impressed in spite of ourselves.

"Why does the Poltergeist trouble us?" asked Miss Christie.

Slowly, mysteriously, the ouija board answered. The pointer moved from one letter to another deliberately, surely, as though guided by intelligence instead of by the finger tips of two blindfolded people, of whom one, at least, was surely a skeptic.

"B-E-C-A-U-S-E O-F C-R-I-M-E," it spelled.

"Oh-h!" gasped Dorothy. "Aunty, quick! Ask it who killed Doctor Gaskell?"

The old lady sat rigid, motionless as a marble statue and as pale. The pointer moved, hesitated, moved again. Her stiffened arms began to tremble.

Then suddenly, from beyond the window, came the strident, insistent call of a quail: "Bob*white!* Bob*white!*"

Aunt Mary screamed. Her hands flew up, clawing at the bandage about her head.

"I—I can't stand it!" she exclaimed. "It's driving me mad! Oh, oh, oh!" Her voice rose in a crescendo of agony. "That noise—that noise—it's killing me!" She drooped in her wheel chair, head on a shoulder, translucent eyelids flickering down, unconscious.

"Humph!" said Somers coolly. "She's fainted this time." He felt her pulse, lifted her fallen eyelids to peer at her pupils, tapped her knees. She moved convulsively. "Get water, Anne. We'd better lay her down. No, she's coming round all right."

Aunt Mary opened tragic eyes. "Wh-what happened? Oh, I know! If I have to listen to those horrible birds any longer I'll die!"

"I'll see to that," said Somers. "But now you'd better go back to bed. You're badly upset; I'll just examine you a bit; then I'll know just what to do."

That did not suit, either. "No!" she answered, almost screaming. "No, no, *no!* Get back, get away, don't touch me! I won't have it—I won't be examined—I won't, I won't! You've been against me every minute, ever since you came," she went on wildly. "You shan't touch me, I tell you!"

In her excitement she heaved herself up by her arms, half rising in her chair, as if to flee. But her legs failed her, and she dropped back, panting, helplessly defiant. "Don't dare to touch me!" she repeated.

"Humph!" said Doctor Somers, rubbing his chin. "Certainly not, dear lady. Don't distress yourself.

I won't come near you at all. But I can do one thing to help you, anyhow. I'll borrow a shotgun to-day, and in the morning after breakfast Peter and I will go out together and kill those quail, so they can't trouble you any more. They must have nested in the bushes back there."

The old lady looked at him more kindly; but both girls cried out at this offer.

"Oh, no!" said Dorothy.

"Oh, please don't!" implored the nurse. "Look what happened when Doctor Parker started to do that. He got into just terrible trouble!"

Somers only laughed and rose. "I'll run down and see Parker," said he. "You'd better lie down, Miss McGregor."

CHAPTER XXXI

A BORROWED SHOTGUN

I DECIDED to accompany the physician, though my night on the sleeper had left me pretty tired. But I wanted to see Lewis; so we got out the faithful flivver and drove downtown.

"Hope the old chap's been well looked after," said Somers. "I left the key with Wakefield before we went. But no doubt Dorothy's been there every day."

We stopped at the constable's house, got the lockup key, and went on to the jail. Poor Lewis looked ill, I thought. Confinement was wearing on his high spirits; his greeting, though hearty enough, was subdued. We told him of our trip to the mountains, and its negative result. He shook his head hopelessly.

"Mighty good of you both, but it was no use. Nothing's any use now; I can feel it; I know it! Some dreadful fate is against me; I'm doomed. They'll convict me of this murder as surely as I sit here."

"Lewis," said I impulsively, "Peter suggested that perhaps you did kill Gaskell at four o'clock, then cleaned the gun and came back, meaning to pretend to discover the body. You—you didn't do *that?*"

He smiled sadly. "You see? Even Peter believes I did it. And you had your doubts, unk. There's

no hope for me—none at all. No, Uncle George, I didn't do that. If I shot Gaskell at all, it was just as I told you: at five o'clock, and by accident. I didn't even know he was there."

"Buck up, Parker," said Somers. "Things are beginning to look bright for you."

Just vague optimism, I thought; and so did Lewis.

But before he could reply some one knocked on the jail door. I unlocked it, and Wakefield appeared, escorting the sheriff.

"Howdy, people! Mr. Uhlman, I hear you-all was up to the hills recent?"

I nodded; and in response to his keen questioning, Somers and I told him all that had transpired there.

"H'm," said he reflectively, fingering his absurd white mustache. "H'm! So Satterfield an' Roarin' Lafe was thereabouts 'at mornin'? Yeah, I kinda s'picioned them two. Y' see, Gaskell come t' me 'bout th' cawn-liquor trade; it was me sent word t' Raleigh on his say-so. Yeah, I kinda reckoned mebbe one or other o' them two mighta done 'at killin'. But they claimed it wa'n't neither of 'em done it, an' you-all believed 'em both, huh? H'm! I done studied about this here killin' a right smart, one time an' another. I reckoned Vanbrugh was all wrong. H'm! Well, gentlemen, I reckon you-all ain't a-goin' t' need them depitty stars no longer. Y' see th' county jail's 'bout fixed now. Oh, they's a right smart o' work left—kinda sorry-lookin' place yit, all scorched, but I reckon we better carry Doc Parker over yonder ag'in. H'm! I better take them stars. You-all c'n tell young McGregor he's resigned; he

ain't a depitty no more. He c'n turn in his badge to-morrow. Rufe here c'n keep 'at lockup key, an' I'll send a reg'lar depitty over t' keep him comp'ny an' carry th' doc t' jail ag'in to-morrow mornin'. H'm! Good day!" He nodded slightly and waddled out.

Lewis sighed dispiritedly. "You see, unk! Redden was inclined to think me innocent until now. He's been mighty decent. I suppose he thought the bootleggers killed Gaskell, and was working quietly along that line; now he thinks I did it. Did you see him look at me? And I'm to be treated like any other prisoner awaiting trial."

We left him. After all, what comfort had we to offer? Doctor Somers called after the retiring constable.

"Oh, Wakefield! Say, Rufe, got a shotgun you'll lend me?"

The big man nodded slowly. "W'y, yes, doc," he replied amicably. It was strange how Pinelands had adopted Somers; already he was intimate with half the town and every one liked him, as did this huge, timorous, boastful constable.

"W'y shore, I gotta gun—kind of a one, leastways. Jist let me lock up, and I'll git 'er, 'f you-all'll carry me home."

After a few minutes we returned to Fort House, Somers holding in the crook of one long arm a dilapidated double-barreled shotgun.

"Not much to look at, as Rufe admitted," he remarked, displaying the weapon. "But I guess she'll shoot, and Peter's got lots of shells."

It was a dubious-looking affair, whose stock had been split and wound with tape and wire, both about the grip and above the lock, where its barrels were hinged. Somers broke it and peered down the barrels.

"A bit rusty," he announced and snapped the barrels into place. They dropped promptly back. "And the catch doesn't work properly. I'll have to watch out, or the old thing'll break when I fire it, and I'll get beaned. But it will do, I expect."

We went on into the house. Aunt Mary was nowhere in sight, but the two girls fastened upon us at once, demanding full details of our trip. "We didn't dare say much about it before Aunt Mary," explained Dorothy. "She acts so queer when we talk about the murder, and Peter is so aggravating. He just keeps saying: 'Wait; let Somers tell it. He was the hero!' So go ahead, doctor, and tell us!"

Somers told our tale, prompted now and again while the two young women listened, spellbound.

"Satterfield showed us up," said he, "and the bunch was just about to eat us alive when the revenue agents stepped in and arrested all hands. We slid down the mountain in the dark, and——"

"Hold on!" interrupted Peter, grinning. "Let me. No, doc, you've got to be a hero, that's all. The government men came in and this Roaring Lafe, this great beefy giant, climbed Somers here and got him by the throat. 'I'm going to kill *you*, anyhow!' he said. And nobody dared shoot, they thrashed about so, and poor feeble old doc here was being choked to death."

He stopped, prolonging the suspense. "Ah-h-h!" sighed Anne. "Go on!"

"And what do you think the old skeleton did? Why, just poked Roaring Lafe in the armpit and paralyzed that arm; and then he up with that pistol you gave him and tapped him on the back of his head, just as gently, and Roaring Lafe drifted off into dreamland, right away, quick. Behold the hee-ro!"

Somers looked annoyed. "It wasn't anything," he said. "It's all in knowing where to hit 'em."

Anne Christie's big violet eyes hung upon him almost reverently. This lanky doctor not only did not fear Roaring Lafe, but he had vanquished him in single combat by force of arms! He might have been a demigod, so worshiping was her gaze.

"Look!" whispered Dorothy. "And he doesn't even see it. Men are so blind! Don't he know she's in love with him?"

If he did he made no sign. He went calmly on while the dull flush faded from his cheeks, telling of the trip down the mountain, of our interview with Rutledge at the jail.

"But—but," said Dorothy, "you s-said it was all right! You said you'd found out who killed Doctor Gaskell, so Lewis could come home—and you didn't! You haven't done a thing! Why, we're worse off than we were before. Oh, dear; oh, dear!"

"I have found out," declared Somers. "Just wait!"

"Wait?" she asked. "Wait? That's all you say —wait, wait, wait! Oh, it's very easy for you to wait; you're not in p-prison, and he's not your h-hus-

band, either! I'm going to send for a lawyer—a detective—somebody! Lewis shan't be c-convicted before my eyes like this. Wait, you keep saying! How much l-longer must I wait?"

"Until to-morrow."

I started, looked at the lanky, imperturbable physician more closely. For all his external calm I saw now that his strange, gray-green eyes shone with excitement; that some inner fever twitched at his lean hands and made them unsteady. What had he discovered that was hidden from me?

"Oh-h! Honest?" asked Dorothy incredulously.

He nodded. "Honest! Just wait until morning; you'll see, unless I'm making a terrible mistake."

"But—but who?" we all demanded, excitedly. "Who did it, then?"

Somers grinned. "Closer!" he ordered and whispered dramatically into our eager ears.

"I think it was—the Poltergeist!"

And he would say no more. I was disgusted at this ill-timed joking; with my nephew in the county jail once more, awaiting trial for his life, this silly jest seemed in bad taste, to say the least of it. But there matters rested for the remainder of a most unpleasant day.

Aunt Mary appeared at supper, looking very haggard, but quite calm. She smiled wanly and talked in a weak voice about spiritism. She quite ignored this morning's outburst; and so did the rest of us.

But I was still more disgusted with Somers when he abandoned his pose of silly credulity and came out flatly to proclaim an utter disbelief in all spiritistic

manifestations. What ailed the fellow? A few hours ago he had not only lapped up Aunt Mary's farrago, but had declared with every appearance of sincerity that Gaskell had been murdered by a ghost; now he announced, with a supercilious sneer, that we had merely imagined the Poltergeist; that it was absurd to suppose that any spirit could have dragged Rosina's bedclothes off her, or destroyed Dorothy's wedding dress.

We were all angry, I think, even Peter.

"I suppose I imagined myself on the floor when the thing dragged my chair from under me," he said.

Somers smiled maddeningly. "You went to sleep and fell off."

"And how about my blankets?" I asked. "You saw yourself they were gone from my bed."

"You walked in your sleep, no doubt, and carried 'em away."

"Do you think I'd sp-spoil my own wedding dress, even if I was asleep?" asked Dorothy indignantly. "And I suppose Rosina stuck pins into herself, too?"

"No doubt." Somers rose, still grinning. "Ghosts!" said he. "Rot! There are no ghosts. You folks dreamed or imagined most of this stuff, and there's probably a very simple explanation for the rest. Just superstition, that's all. You've exaggerated and dwelt upon these things until you're all convinced a ghost did 'em, and you use all sorts of trifles to bolster up your belief."

There was just enough truth in the charge to irritate us all. Only Aunt Mary failed to protest, but

the strangely vindictive look which she bent upon Somers made me catch my breath.

"I shan't argue about it," she said coldly. "I only hope, Doctor Somers, that you may never suffer for your disbelief. Sometimes the spirits resent disbelief, doctor, and punish it!"

I shivered, there was such prophetic menace in her tones, but Somers only smiled again.

"I'm going to bed early," he declared. "I left that shotgun in the cupboard on the back porch. Don't touch it, you girls; it's loaded. I'm about used up; I'm going to sleep late if I can. But after breakfast Peter and I will go a-hunting for bobwhites!"

"Don't!" begged Dorothy again. "If you do, I'm just sure somebody will be killed. It's bad luck to hunt those quail; I know it!"

CHAPTER XXXII

THE POLTERGEIST'S LAST VISIT

I WENT to bed early, as we all did. That was a very tired household. Somers disappeared directly after supper, and Aunt Mary followed half an hour later.

Dorothy and Anne Christie, after the old lady had been safely tucked in, returned to the living room and sat with Peter and me for a while, trying dismally to make talk. But, after two disturbed nights, they were both dead for sleep. Dorothy nodded over her embroidery, and Miss Christie wore again that expression of bovine somnolence, which Somers' medicine, or the events of this last month, had driven away. And Peter and I were little better.

At last Miss Christie rose. "It's no use," she declared. "I'm going to bed. I—I feel as sleepy and as stupid as I ever did before I began taking Doctor Somers' tablets. If the Poltergeist should come back to-night, I'd never know it—not unless he dragged me out of bed. And then I'd just curl up on the floor, I think. I'm so sleepy!"

It was not later than nine o'clock, but we were all exhausted, and we all went to bed. I abandoned my half-formed design of sitting up to watch for the Poltergeist. Let him come! I was too tired to care.

Peter, yawning up the stairs beside me, expressed the same idea. "I thought I'd sit up," he said, "and watch for that darn ghost, just to prove Somers was wrong, but I'm too sleepy."

Somers' door was closed, and no sound came from behind it. Evidently he, too, had succumbed to the need of rest.

I bade Dorothy and Peter a sleepy good night, and in five minutes I was undressed and in bed, fathoms deep in dreamless slumber.

A sudden wild shriek awakened me, such a scream as would drag the soundest sleeper from his bed and bring the cold sweat out upon his forehead, a scream of mortal fear. It was Dorothy's voice!

Despite my rheumatism, I was out of bed and at her door in two leaps. My heart was in my throat.

"Dorothy!" I said. "Dorothy! What is it, child?"

She clutched me, trembling. "Oh," she said, shaking pitifully. "Oh, dear! I—I can't——"

"What is it?" Peter was beside me, shaking his sister's arm. "What's happened? Are you all right?"

"I—there's a s-snake in my bed!"

Came a soft pad of unshod feet, the swish of loose garments, and Somers was beside us. Even in my excitement I noticed and wondered at it—that he came, not from his own room, but up the stairs.

"What?" he asked, with one flashing look at us. "Unk, Pete"—he clutched our shoulders cruelly—"tell me, is there a back stairway to this joint?"

We nodded dumbly, amazed at his query.

"Oh, scissors!" He wheeled and disappeared as abruptly as he had come. I heard his bare feet pounding down the stairs.

Peter switched on the lights, and all three of us started back, laughing confusedly.

"Oh, dear me!" said Dorothy, drawing her bathrobe about her.

Peter looked at my pajamas and laughed consumedly. "Those wide red stripes are frightfully becoming, unk!"

I snorted. They were good linen pajamas, and I had bought them very cheap because of those very stripes. I am past the days of personal vanity.

"You're no beauty yourself in those purple things," I replied resentfully.

Then we separated, but returned presently, wrapped in dressing gowns, to investigate Dorothy's bed.

Somers came back up the stairs. He, too, was in a bathrobe and slippers, and he held one hand tightly shut.

"Missed it," he said. "I didn't know about those back stairs. What happened here?"

"A s-snake in my bed!" said the girl, shivering.

"Humph!" He threw back its covers. "Snake? Ha! No wonder."

He clutched at the sheet. It was damp, and in its center, right where poor Dorothy's back must have been, was a long sliver of ice.

"Here's your snake," Somers declared.

"I don't care!" replied Dorothy. "It was just like a snake, long and cold and clammy. Br-r-r!"

He picked up the piece of ice and carried it to the bathroom. "Well, your snake's gone. Miss anything from the room?"

"Nun-no," she repeated wonderingly. Then she went to the dresser and looked about a moment. "I

do, too! My wedding ring and my diamond! Oh, dear, my rings are gone!"

"Here," said Somers, opening his hand. His strange eyes danced brightly. Triumph showed in every line of his face. In his palm lay both rings.

"Oh, you dear man! Where were they? And now you believe in the Poltergeist, don't you?"

"I found them in—in the hall. And as for the ghost—why, we will get Aunt Mary to explain that later. Can you go back to sleep now?"

The girl nodded doubtfully. "I—I think so, if all of you will leave your doors wide open?"

"I'm going to sit up," said Somers, and Dorothy, somewhat reassured, turned to her bed as we went out.

The physician entered his own room. We heard him whistle shrilly. "Come here, you chaps!" he called softly.

Peter and I went in. And there, driven deep through coverlet and sheets, right into the mattress, was a carving knife!

"Humph!" said Somers. "Looks like the Poltergeist wasn't entirely harmless, don't it? In the dark he must have thought I was in bed."

Not without difficulty he pulled out the seven-inch blade. It would have pierced his body, had he been sleeping there!

"Where were you?" I whispered.

"Me? On the stairs, watching for the Poltergeist. Those back stairs fooled me." And he would say no more, except, "I found those rings just outside Aunt Mary's door."

"Maybe the ghost visited her, too!" I cried, alarmed. "Run down and see, Peter. We forgot the poor old lady."

"Humph!" said Somers. "She's good friends with the ghost, but go anyhow, Peter."

Peter went. "Sound asleep, she says," he reported. "Didn't hear anything. I went right in; Miss Christie was dead to the world; didn't hear me knock."

"Go to bed," directed Somers. "No, nothing more to-night. Things are going very nicely. In the morning this ought to be cleared up."

So we went back to bed, despairing of further information, but I could not sleep.

I lay there wide-eyed through the long, black hours, wondering—wondering. Who—what was this specter, this Poltergeist? If Somers had been in his bed to-night, it would have killed him; had it killed Gaskell, also? And what did Aunt Mary know of the grisly thing? Aunt Mary would explain, Somers had said.

The old lady's bed faced the window, I remembered, and that window looked out upon the tangle of scrub oaks, where Gaskell had met his death. It must have been light, even at four o'clock. Had Aunt Mary been awake that morning? And if so, what had she seen? And why had she kept it secret? There were huge cellars under the old house, I knew, cellars long unexplored.

Had Gaskell's murderer come to the window? What whispered colloquy had been held, there in the gray dawn, between the paralytic and this stranger,

this grisly ghost of the murderous hands? Had the old lady recognized him, shielded him, told him where to hide, perhaps, in those long closed cellars, where she might have played as a child? Fort House was an old home of the McGregors; in the days of Dorothy's grandfather, Aunt Mary might well have visited it, explored its vast underground caverns, where wines had once been stored.

And what—who—was this murderer, then, whom she had shielded, who had wandered about Fort House of nights, screaming horridly, eating from the pantry, breaking dishes, playing ghostly tricks, stabbing, as he had meant to, an innocent guest? I went cold at the picture in my imagination. Some lunatic, some secret, stealthy madman, who might yet slaughter us all!

I sat up in bed, straining my ears, glad of the pistol I had rummaged out at home, and which still lay in my bag. I got it out, resolved to keep vigil. If this Poltergeist, this madman, came back, I would protect Dorothy at least. And in the morning we would hunt, not harmless quail in the back yard, but a wanton murderer through the cellars.

The hours wore on, and dawn came slowly. As the east turned gray, the quail piped up their matutinal song.

"Bob*white!* Bob*white!*" they whistled; louder, closer, than ever before.

So shrill was their continual outcry, and so close beneath me, that at last I tiptoed to the window. Perhaps I might see them, locate their nests, against

our later hunting. I swung back the screen and put out my head, peering almost straight down.

"Bob*white!* Bob*white!* Bob*white!*" they piped at three-second intervals, regular as a clock and surprisingly loud and close.

And then I gasped and almost fell out of the window. These were no birds! The cry of quail was counterfeited so exactly that I could scarcely believe my eyes; instead of a little brown bird, Floyd Somers crouched beneath Aunt Mary's window, diagonally below my own, his long, lean legs grotesquely folded under him, his thin lips pursed. From his lips, at regular, three-second intervals, came the shrill cry of the bobwhite quail, exactly imitated!

This childish buffoonery angered me sorely. What ailed the man? Had he no appreciation of what hung over us? In the midst of the dark shadow which covered Fort House, before the very eyes, perhaps, of a lurking, murderous madman, he could find nothing better to do than play this puerile practical joke upon a helpless old woman.

"What are you doing, man? Stop it!" I shouted wrathfully.

He looked up, in no way abashed, and gestured vigorously for silence. Despite my rage, his desperate earnestness, his frantic signs for secrecy, closed my lips. Wondering mightily, I huddled into a few things and hurried downstairs and around the house.

Somers still crouched beneath the east window, whistling with all his might: "Bob*white!* Bob*white!*" I blundered through the honeysuckle vines toward him.

"Shut up, man!" he said to me and clutched my shoulder to draw me down beside him. "Want to spoil everything?" he demanded, his lips close to my ear. "She'll hear you. Shut up, I say, and watch!"

I subsided, born down, if not convinced, by his angry sincerity. Whatever his purpose, this was no silly joke; I could see that much. There was some deep-laid, important plan beneath this foolery.

"Bob*white!*" he whistled. "Bob*white!*"

A faint movement came from within the open window, and a weak, querulously patient voice said: "Miss Christie! Nurse!"

Somers held his breath; then, remembering, whistled the quail's call louder than before. "If she'll only stay asleep, or pretend to be asleep, as I told her!" he exclaimed. "Bob*white!*"

Asleep or not, the nurse made no answer. Aunt Mary called again tentatively, then querulously. Still the nurse made no reply.

"Ah-h!" sighed Somers. Gripping my arm fiercely, he whistled louder yet: "Bob*white!* Bob*white!*"

I could not believe my ears. Within, the nurse's quiet breathing ran on unchanged, almost a snore. Surely she was asleep! Yet I heard footsteps, the unmistakable padding of bare feet across the floor! What—who—could it be? The murderer?

"I'll kill those miserable birds *myself!*"

That was Mary McGregor's voice! And she seemed to be alone. What could she be doing? The patter of bare feet, scarcely audible, faded away. I heard a door open and close stealthily.

Somers erected himself, his long legs straightening

telescopically. He peered in the window. "Look!" he exclaimed.

On my very tiptoes, straining higher, craning my neck, I looked. Aunt Mary's bed was empty! She was nowhere in sight! And I saw the edge of Anne Christie's bed in the inner room, and a long braid of blond hair hung over it toward the floor.

"Down!" ordered Somers. "Quick!"

He dragged me back just in time. I caught one furtive glimpse of Mary McGregor, indubitably erect, walking, upon her two paralyzed legs, like any other person. And her face, not sweet or patient now, was distorted with maniacal rage. She carried a shotgun!

I ducked below the window ledge, stunned with amazement. Right over my head I heard the grating of a gun barrel against the window screen, a muttered exclamation, the tremendous *wham* of black powder! A burning gun wad scorched my hand; bird shot pattered in the leaves behind us; Somers dragged me away.

"Quick!" he said. "You saw, you heard? Run, before she has time to hide it!"

I raced round the house beside him. "What—what does it mean?" I asked. "Why, she's paralyzed! Is she crazy, or am I?"

"Mean? It means that the Poltergeist has made its last appearance," answered Somers. "Now!"

We were in the house, through the long, crooked hall, at Aunt Mary's closed door. Without waiting to knock, he burst in.

CHAPTER XXXIII

THE FINAL EXPLANATION

AUNT MARY McGREGOR lay quietly in her bed, propped with pillows. Her drawn face wore a look of sweet resignation; she was gazing absently out of the open window. The place was so still, so peaceful; the old lady's expression was so calm; the illusion of a quiet sick room was so complete that I almost doubted what my eyes and ears had just told me.

Only the ragged hole in the window screen, through which that charge of bird shot had just poured, and the drifting, pungent cloud of black powder smoke, which still filled the air, convinced me that I had not dreamed. The shotgun was nowhere in sight.

As we burst in, Anne Christie was just emerging from her inner room, struggling into a bathrobe, so quickly had we come. Aunt Mary turned at our entry, her thin eyebrows raised, as for a patient rebuke at this disturbance. Then she saw Somers. She stared at him dumbly for an instant, with bulging eyes and horrified, unbelieving face. *"You!"* she exclaimed. "You!"

Somers nodded brusquely. "Quite so! You see, I wasn't in bed when you came in last night."

The old lady wet her colorless lips. "I—I d-don't understand," she whispered. "What—what does this—this impudent intrusion mean?"

It was a weak attempt at bluster. The physician ignored it. "It's no use, Aunt Mary," he replied almost kindly. His eyes pitied her. "You can't get away with it this time. I saw you myself, and Uhlman, here, saw you, too. We saw you get out of bed and go after that gun; we saw you shoot out of the window at the quail."

"Gun?" asked Aunt Mary, stubbornly uncomprehending. "What gun? I was asleep. There's no gun here."

By this time Peter was pounding in, Dorothy at his heels. "What now?" he demanded.

"Oh, what is it?" asked the girl. "Has anybody been killed this time?"

With one backward-flung hand, Somers gestured for silence. His gray-green eyes were steady upon the old lady.

"No use," he repeated inexorably. "The gun's right in this room somewhere; you didn't have time to take it out again. It's hidden here; in your bed, perhaps. Shall I find it, or will you?"

Aunt Mary's black eyes fell before his steady gaze. "Spare me that, at least!" she said petulantly. "You may burst in on me as you did; I can't prevent that, helpless as I am, and my own flesh and blood"—with a vicious look at poor Peter—"won't even try to save me from such insolence! But you needn't go further; you needn't search my bed!"

Leaning forward she reached a slim, veined hand beneath the covers to bring out Rufus Wakefield's battered shotgun, still smoking faintly. A fresh reek of burned powder filled the room.

We all gasped, staring at her with shocked incomprehension. Even now the thing seemed incredible!

"Aunt—Ma-ry!" whispered Dorothy. "How—what have you done?"

The old lady began to weep helplessly. "Nun-nothing!" she wailed. "Dorothy—Peter—will you stand there and see your poor, paralyzed aunt insulted like this? Send this insolent person out; make him let me alone!"

Somers shook his head. His dark face was very pitiful; I think he felt for this poor old wretch even more than did the rest of us.

"Come," he urged. "Don't make this any harder. Let's get it over with! You were the Poltergeist, weren't you?"

Aunt Mary only sobbed.

"Weren't you?"

Dropping her hands, she disclosed a haggard, tear-streaked face, as she turned upon us, not without dignity. "If you must have it—yes!" she said. "Yes! I was the Poltergeist. It was easy, so easy! You were so stupid, all of you; you never even guessed. And this stupid, sleepy, worthless nurse" —with a bitter glance at poor Anne—"lay there and snored and never knew! I slipped in and out—I broke dishes—I ate my fill from the pantry. None of you cared if I was hungry; not one of you would offer me a bite to eat! I helped myself."

"Why, Aunt Mary!" said Dorothy. "You know we just begged you and coaxed you, and you always

said your appetite was so delicate! All the pies and cakes and jam and candy—did you eat them, too?"

The old lady swept on, unheeding. "No one in this house ever paid me the attention I deserved. That was my revenge; I served you out for neglecting me! Where's your wedding finery now, my girl? Ha, ha, ha!"

She gave a wild, screeching laugh; it made me shudder. Surely this was a maniac who confronted us, hunched there on the bed, her shaking hands playing about the stock of a shotgun!

"I made a fine ghost!" she exulted. "It was sport —such sport!"

Doctor Somers groaned aloud. "Poor thing, oh, poor thing!" I heard him whisper. And then aloud he asked: "And you shot Doctor Gaskell, didn't you?"

Her head went up and back in that old, proud gesture. "He—he insulted me—insulted a poor, helpless paralytic! He laughed, and I told you. I just begged of you to drive those miserable quail away. I told you they would set me crazy; and Peter paid no attention. Nobody paid any attention at all. Doctor Parker promised to shoot them, but I knew he didn't mean it. Why, that morning they whistled and whistled for hours! I waited and waited; nobody came, nobody stirred, nobody cared if they drove me mad! At last I got up, helpless as I was and paralyzed."

She paused abruptly, seeming for the first time to be conscious of the incongruity of a paralytic getting up and walking about.

"I—sometimes my affliction leaves me for a few minutes," she faltered. "I got up and went out—a poor, helpless old woman—to do what these hulking men should have done for me, if they'd been men at all! Peter's gun stood on the back porch; I loaded it. Oh, when I was a girl, I used to be a good shot! That was before I was paralyzed.

"I went out back, into the scrub oaks. It was daylight, though the sun wasn't up. And there I met Doctor Gaskell. He—he insulted me; he laughed! He asked me if I'd recovered from my paralysis, and he laughed! He—he called me an old f-faker! The cad! And I answered him as a high-spirited gentlewoman should answer such an insult!"

She paused, looking down at the shotgun in her lap. All this while she had been handling it unconsciously, as it seemed; breaking its breech, extracting the empty shell, playing with the undischarged cartridge. As she sat there, all hunched in the bed, her thin face distorted with unlovely passions, she looked like a particularly unpleasant old witch. Her cheeks were all sunken; without her false teeth her mouth seemed to have fallen in, so that high-bridge nose and pointed chin almost touched each other.

Then she raised her head to cast an evil glance at Doctor Somers. "I hurried back," she went on monotonously. "I cleaned the gun—oh, I knew how well enough—and put it where I'd found it; then came to my room. Everybody was asleep, even this stupid nurse. She hadn't heard anything; she never heard anything. Blockhead! I was safe, quite safe.

Nobody could suspect. It was the birds—devils, rather. They knew; they'd seen it all! And they perched outside my windows every morning before daybreak and whistled, whistled, whistled; they weren't birds. They were devils, I tell you—devils, accusing me! They have driven me mad at last! And then you had to mix in, you, Somers! Ah-h-h, how I hate you! Sneaking and watching and spying on me! If only I could have killed you in the night, as I meant to! I'd have been safe then. But, no, you had to keep it up, you and those birds. You plotted this against me, you and the birds together. They helped you, I know! I heard them just now, outside my window, mocking me, accusing me, calling you to come and betray me. But you shan't profit by it!"

As rage overpowered her, she ceased to make any pretense of palsy, but slid her lean shanks out of the bed and stood erect, facing her unmasker, her face distorted with hate. And now, before we could move, before we could cry out, she snapped the breech of the gun she still held, jerked it to her shoulder, and pulled the trigger.

I heard the click of the hammer upon an empty shell, and still we stood motionless, all but Anne Christie. With one smothered scream she leaped wildly forward, threw herself upon Floyd Somers' breast, shielding his body with her own. She moved with the speed of desperate love. Before we others could intervene, while my arm was still outstretched, and Peter was leaning forward, the second trigger moved. I saw the hammer fall; the bass roar of the

explosion, doubly loud in that confined space, rang deafeningly in our ears.

It all happened so swiftly that I must set down, one after another, a dozen things which happened all at once.

Even as the old lady fired at Somers, protected by Anne Christie's body, the gun seemed to leap in her hands, to break apart. A blinding cloud of blue smoke spurted out from its breach, hiding Aunt Mary from us for an instant. The gun barrels, instead of pointing at her victim, swung downward at a sharp angle; birdshot rolled down them and pattered on the floor. With them came a burning gun wad, upon which Peter trod mechanically. And Aunt Mary, the broken gun still clutched in her blackened hands, dropped back across the bed and lay very still, in a lessening cloud of smoke.

Doctor Somers freed himself gently from the nurse's swooning grip, set her in a chair, and stepped forward. He leaned over the old lady and touched her left temple with a steady hand. Her face was quite unmarred and very peaceful; only upon the left temple was a little blue bruise. Beside her head lay an empty shell.

"She's quite dead," said the doctor softly, and he drew a corner of the sheet over that quiet face.

"She didn't quite lock the breech," he went on, picking up the battered shotgun. "I told you last night, unk, it didn't work properly. When she closed the breech, this catch failed to take hold, and the kick broke it open again, so the shell drove backward out of the breech and struck her in the temple."

He straightened, sighing deeply. "I want you-all to listen," he told us impressively, "and remember this, whenever you think about Miss McGregor: she wasn't to blame! She wasn't responsible for her acts; she was insane. Think of her as kindly as you can, all of you. Poor soul! She's dead now; she's paid for everything. Remember, don't blame her, any of you—ever! She wasn't responsible."

Spoken at that time and place, the words struck deep, as he knew they would, I suppose. And I think that our memories of the poor woman have all been kindlier for them. It was a gentle, knightly speech from the man whom she had tried to murder twice in four hours.

"But—but I don't understand yet," put in Dorothy. Indeed all of us shared her bewilderment, I think. "Aunt Mary did it—she shot Doctor Gaskell, I suppose, since she admitted it. But how, why, and how did you find out?"

"Come out into the living room and I'll explain," he said. "It's all clear enough now."

We trooped out after him; a motley crowd we must have made, too. Somers was fully dressed; at least he wore tennis shoes, an old pair of flannel trousers, and Peter's jersey, which made his lean torso more unbelievably skinny than ever. But the rest of us were in advanced negligee. I wore trousers; Peter had only a bathrobe over his pajamas; both the girls were in kimonos, with hair in braids down their backs. We were a ludicrous sight, no doubt, but none of us had the heart to laugh.

"As soon as I heard about the Poltergeist," Somers

began, "I suspected Aunt Mary. Such tricks always indicate that there's an hysterical person somewhere about. This 'Poltergeist' stuff and the witchcraft, that dozens of harmless old women were burned alive for, not so many centuries ago—they're all the work of hystericals. Such cases delight in mystifying people, scaring them, playing queer, malicious tricks on them, and all that. It's been a well-recognized sign of hysteria for fifty years. So as soon as I heard of the Poltergeist, I began to look for an hysterical, and that led straight to Aunt Mary; she had all the earmarks.

"I concluded right away that her paralysis was hysterical, too, or she couldn't get about to play ghost. Palsies are common enough in hysteria, you know. I don't mean that she faked it consciously; she was really paralyzed. That is, she couldn't move her legs because she *believed* she couldn't. She didn't pretend. At night she'd get out of bed in a state of hysterical somnambulism and go about playing ghost; but, when she got back to bed, she'd forget all about that. When she was fully awake she was paralyzed; she couldn't move, and I've no doubt that she used to believe in the Poltergeist as firmly as any of you.

"She was in the same state, no doubt, when she went out with Peter's shotgun that morning. The quail disturbed her, and she thought, as far as sleepwalkers do think, she'd only to go out and point a gun to kill them. She knew that shotgun was on the back porch, didn't she?"

I nodded. "I left it out there for Lewis," I ex-

plained. "He was to come over early for it. And I remember Aunt Mary sent for me, when I was going to bed, to ask where it was, and if it was safe."

"Quite so." Somers paused, scowling ruefully. "I've been frightfully stupid all through this thing!" he declared. "I knew Miss McGregor was hysterical; why, those 'knots in her neck' alone would have proved that. I was convinced she was playing ghost, just as one takes any unimportant thing for granted without stopping to verify it. But it never occurred to me that, if she could get up to play ghost, she could have got up to shoot Gaskell, too. The idea never entered my head until 'Roaring Lafe' Rutledge told us about the 'ha'nt' he saw. We owe him that, anyhow. And you chaps were pretty peeved with me afterward, when I said I thought it was the Poltergeist killed Gaskell, weren't you?"

He gave us a fleeting glance and went on. "So Aunt Mary got up very quietly and went out after the shotgun. Your sleepiness, your hypothyroidism, Anne, made it very handy for her; she wasn't afraid of waking you, and I suppose she was getting bolder. All her ghost tricks had gone unsuspected—who could suspect a paralytic of running about the house of nights?—and she figured she could even go out and let off a shotgun and get away with it; that is, if she thought about it at all, in this somnambulistic state of hers.

"Well, out she went, got the gun, loaded it, and went on into the brush, just about the time Gaskell entered it, I suppose. It must have been then that

Rutledge saw her and was scared off. And then she met Doctor Gaskell face to face, out there. I wonder which of them was more startled? The shock wakened her, I suppose, and there she was, suddenly face to face with herself. It's a terrible thing for anybody, that—to have all one's little self-deceptions and hypocrisies stripped away in an instant, to see how one's been fooling one's self! And it is more terrible still for an hysterical, whose self-deceptions are deepest and most fully a part of the personality.

"There she was, compelled for once to admit to herself that she was an old faker, that she wasn't paralyzed after all—or how could she be out there, standing up? I don't know what happened, of course, or what Gaskell said. Something indiscreet, it must have been, or the old lady would have dropped down right there. Her paralysis would have returned as soon as she waked up, and she'd have had to be carried back to bed. But he said something, taunted her, I suppose; told her he knew all the time she was faking and wasn't really paralyzed at all. And he laughed at her. That was very unwise; if he'd been used to handling the insane he never would have laughed.

"She was holding a loaded shotgun, and there was the only man on earth who knew her secret, who could expose her double life. And to have her secret known would destroy all the sympathy, all the admiration which she'd worked for so patiently these fourteen years and more. And Gaskell laughed!

"Well, anger and excitement kept her up, I suppose, and enabled her to forget her paralysis for the

moment. She shot him; raced back to the house, cleaned the gun, and put it where she found it; ran to her room and popped back into bed, with her heart racing horribly, I suppose. And there her paralysis came back. Two minutes later she couldn't have stood on her feet any more than a real, organic paralytic.

"The thing preyed on her, of course, tormented her conscience. You noticed the change; you all spoke of it, how she grew more irritable, more selfish and exacting, every day. And Lewis' arrest made it worse, of course. She had a hard time, poor, crazy old woman! But, after she had killed one man to preserve her pitiful secret, one could hardly expect her to betray it, just to save the life of another. She hoped, no doubt, that Lewis would be acquitted; but most of all she hoped that she wouldn't be suspected. I knew she was uneasy about me; she was afraid I might guess, and you remember what a scene she made when I tried to examine her. She feared I'd discover, as Gaskell had, that she could walk after all. The whole thing preyed on her and made her more restless of nights; it brought on new attacks of somnambulism, and the Poltergeist grew more active. Her fears of me worked on her unconscious mind until last night she tried to kill me with a knife."

"Ah-h-h!" gasped Anne Christie. For neither of the girls knew of that carving knife which had transfixed Somers' empty bed. "Ah, my dear!"

The physician took her hand. "I wasn't there, Anne," said he gently. "I was up, watching the

stairs; I hoped the Poltergeist might make its appearance last night. That's why I was so rude at supper and told everybody I didn't believe in it. I hoped that, if Aunt Mary thought me a skeptic, the Poltergeist might come up to convince me. But I hardly looked for a carving knife!

"It worked, though," he went on. "The ghost walked, but she got away from me. I didn't know about the back stairs, and she must have slipped down that way, while I ran up the front ones. I nearly had her at that; she dropped your rings, Dorothy, just as she was sliding through the door.

"Well, I had proved to myself, then, that Aunt Mary was the ghost, but I hadn't caught her. And I knew that, unless I did, it was quite useless to ask for a confession. So I went on with this other plan. You know how the quail annoyed her all along; it was that started this whole dreadful affair. And lately they worried her even more; she thought they were accusing her, as she said just now. So I borrowed this gun and left it on the porch, right where the other had been, and spoke about it at supper, to make sure she knew. Then this morning I hid right outside her window and imitated the whistle of a quail. It was the same situation, you see, and I hoped it might arouse the same reaction.

"It did. You were there, too, Uncle George. I whistled and whistled; at last we heard the old lady call. Anne didn't answer; she was too sleepy, I suppose. But I told her last night to pretend to be asleep anyway, whatever happened. At last, satisfied that she was safe, Aunt Mary got up and went

after the gun, just as I'd hoped she would. She didn't come outdoors, as I'd expected; she was too upset, too irrational to realize, I suppose, that some one would surely hear if she fired from her window. All she knew was that a quail was just outside, and she must silence it somehow. When she shot, Uncle George and I ran in; you know the rest."

Dorothy relaxed with a tired sigh. "Oh, dear!" she whispered. "I'm so tired, so kind of stunned and numb! I don't know what to think. I ought to be sorry, but all I can feel is a sense of relief. Lewis free, no more Poltergeist, and no more Aunt Mary to complain all the time. Oh, dear me, it's horrid, it's unnatural!"

Poor child! She had been through so much. This last tragedy had stunned her; she had no emotions left.

CHAPTER XXXIV

MATING TIME

WE had my nephew home with us that very day. Somers and I went to the State solicitor, Toby Vanbrugh, with our tale, and he marked Lewis Parker's indictment, *"nolle pros,"* with a very bad grace. It was hard upon him, after all, to see his big case collapse like a pricked bubble. He had built high hopes upon the prosecution of the case of the people against C. Lewis Parker; he had seen himself well advertised by its prosecution, elected, perhaps, State senator upon the strength of it, with who knows what further political advancement beyond, governor—United States senator! He had a healthy opinion of his abilities, had the Honorable Toby Vanbrugh. And now all that was gone; in the face of Miss McGregor's ante-mortem statement, vouched for by five witnesses, he could do no less than drop the case, and he knew it.

On the whole, the newspapers were as kind as we could have expected. One or two of them played the case up, for it was a unique news story; but that will pass soon enough, I trust, and poor, demented Aunt Mary will be left to rest quietly beneath her modest headstone, where the bobwhites, that whistle in the quiet cemetery through long spring mornings, can disturb her no more.

It was two days after the tragic dénouement of

our mystery, and Dorothy and Lewis, reunited, sat hand in hand in the big living room of Fort House. The slanting sun cast long yellow beams through its western windows and played lovingly on the girl's black hair, so that red, coppery lights glinted in it.

To them entered Peter McGregor and I. "Well, Dot," said her brother cheerfully, "I suppose you'll be leaving us now?"

Dorothy nodded. "We'll be in our own little house to-morrow. Rosina's over there now, scrubbing and cleaning, until your life isn't safe for it. And she's promised to have breakfast waiting for us there in the morning."

"Well," he sighed, "it'll be lonely here, but I suppose you're not sorry to leave Fort House."

The girl shivered. "No; we were happy here once, but everything seems so changed. I miss——" She stopped, biting her lips, and I knew she thought of poor old Aunt Mary, in some way lovable for all her selfishness, whom we had laid to rest in the churchyard that afternoon.

Peter sighed again. "Poor Aunt Mary! She did terrible things; she made us all suffer; but, after all, she wasn't to blame."

So we all felt; she had been irresponsible. Doctor Somers' kindly judgment, delivered over her dead body in that east bedroom, had had its effect. We remembered the old lady kindly enough, as the puppet of her own mad impulses, more to be pitied than blamed.

"Well," said I more briskly, "you two are fixed. You're safely married, even if you didn't have a

big wedding, and all ready to settle down in your own home. And Somers, I suppose, will be going North again presently. But what will Anne Christie do?"

Dorothy gave me a pitying, superior glance. "Oh, you men!" she said. "Listen!"

We listened obediently, and we heard faint voices drifting in through the open southern windows, which faced the front porch.

"I'll be going back to the hospital now, I suppose." That was Doctor Somers' brusque voice; it sounded rather less than pleased.

A faint-heard sigh. "Must you go?" Miss Christie's low tones were wistfully tremulous. I must strain to hear.

"Must I? Why, not for another fortnight. Why?"

"Because—because I——"

"Anne! Do you want me to stay?"

"Oh, the idiot!" exclaimed Dorothy. "Does she?"

"Hush, Dot!" And we all listened frankly.

"I—I don't want you to go," whispered Anne Christie.

"Anne, dear!" There was a tiny rustle, as if he had moved closer. "I'm thirty-eight years old, a battered, skinny, homely brute——"

"You are not!"

"A grotesque-looking creature, almost middle-aged, and just starting my chosen work. I've frittered away years and years, just studying, working on a small salary when I might have been earning big money for my wife."

"For your w-wife?"

"Yes, when I get one. And here I am, with my best years gone, little better than a failure."

"You're not! You're just wonderful, the most wonderful man I ever saw or dreamed of!"

"Better than Doctor Gaskell, even?"

"Of course! And," very wistfully, "I h-hope you'll be very happy with your w-wife, whoever she is!"

"Humph!" A characteristic snort, expressing disgust of this evasion, this edging about a topic. "Anne Christie, will you marry me?"

"I'm only a poor mountain girl, and my father's in prison for making moonshine liquor!"

"Stepfather!" stubbornly replied Somers.

"Well, but I'm not—not g-good enough."

"Anne!" A chair slammed back. "Anne—dear, I love you. Are you going to marry me, or not?"

For all answer there came a little, murmurous, cooing sound and a rustling, as if a girl in crisp gingham had settled more comfortably into the crook of some one's arm.

A long silence followed, while we within doors smiled tenderly at nothing. Then: "Oh, Floyd, honey, let me go. I'm s-sure that man saw us; he's looking back and laughing!"

I sighed, as a lonely old man will. "Two more accounted for," said I. "That leaves only you and me, Peter."

"Not me!" the boy replied promptly. "I'm going to be married in December."

"Why, Peter McGregor. And you never told me!" Dorothy looked shocked.

"We-ell, Dot, you see, I didn't know it myself until I was in New York that last time. And I got back to find old Lewis in jail, and everybody so upset—I thought I'd better keep it to myself for a while, until things brightened up a bit."

"Who—who is she?" demanded Dorothy.

I did not listen. I am a very selfish old man. All these bright young folk whom I loved, all the friends I had on earth, I thought gloomily, had paired off, and I was left alone. I tried to smile.

"Congratulations, Peter! That's just fine. It's the mating season. Well, it's time I settled down, too. I'll go now and write a letter."

"Stop, unk!" Lewis caught my arm. "What makes you look so queer? What letter do you mean?"

"Why, to Stamford, to the Home for the Aged there. It's a nice homey place and very exclusive. I—I have f-friends there, too. I'm going to buy a membership."

"You are not!" declared Dorothy and my nephew at once. "Why, your room's waiting for you at our new bungalow; we've moved your things over there, and everything."

"You are not!" cried Peter. "Why, unk, I was counting on you to bach in with me here at Fort House until I bring Edith down at Christmas time to take care of us both!"

"You are not!" That was Floyd Somers, in from

the porch, his extraordinarily long, lean arm wrapped about Anne's shoulders. "You're coming to live with Anne and me, of course! I've decided to resign from the hospital and buy out Gaskell's practice. A little general medicine will do me good, and there's plenty of medicolegal work in North Carolina, once I get to be known here. I like this country. We're going to buy Gaskell's house, Anne and I; and of course you'll live with us there!"

My eyes filled with tears. After all, I was not friendless nor forgotten. "God b-bless you, children!" I said. "I'll stay with you all, turn and turn about."

My story is done. I am living with Lewis and Dorothy; but, when Anne and Floyd come back from their honeymoon next month, I shall go there for a while, and in January I move to Fort House, to stay with Peter and his Edith. I hope she may prove to be as true and as sweet as my other two nieces—by marriage and courtesy!

Ralph Satterfield and his fellows of the corn-whisky ring are safe in Atlanta; and Somers need not fear the bootleggers' vengeance for another twenty years, at least. As for Roaring Lafe Rutledge, he never came to trial. He died in prison of some heart condition, brought on, Doctor Somers says, by excessive drinking.

Aunt Mary McGregor sleeps in the Pinelands cemetery, no more than a dozen feet from the man she slew. We put flowers on both graves impartially, as the genial sun of North Carolina shines on both;

and the quail whistle "bob*white!* bob*white!*" without disturbing the rest of either.

We do not judge her. As Floyd Somers said, "When you have stood, with a deadly weapon in hand, facing an enemy who has power to betray your secrets and destroy the security of your whole life; and when you have let him go unscathed, knowing you could kill him with impunity, then, and not till then, dare you blame Mary McGregor."

Let that be her epitaph. But I, for one, shall never to my dying day hear the quail calling "bob*white!* bob*white!*" of a lazy summer morning without an inward shrinking.

THE END